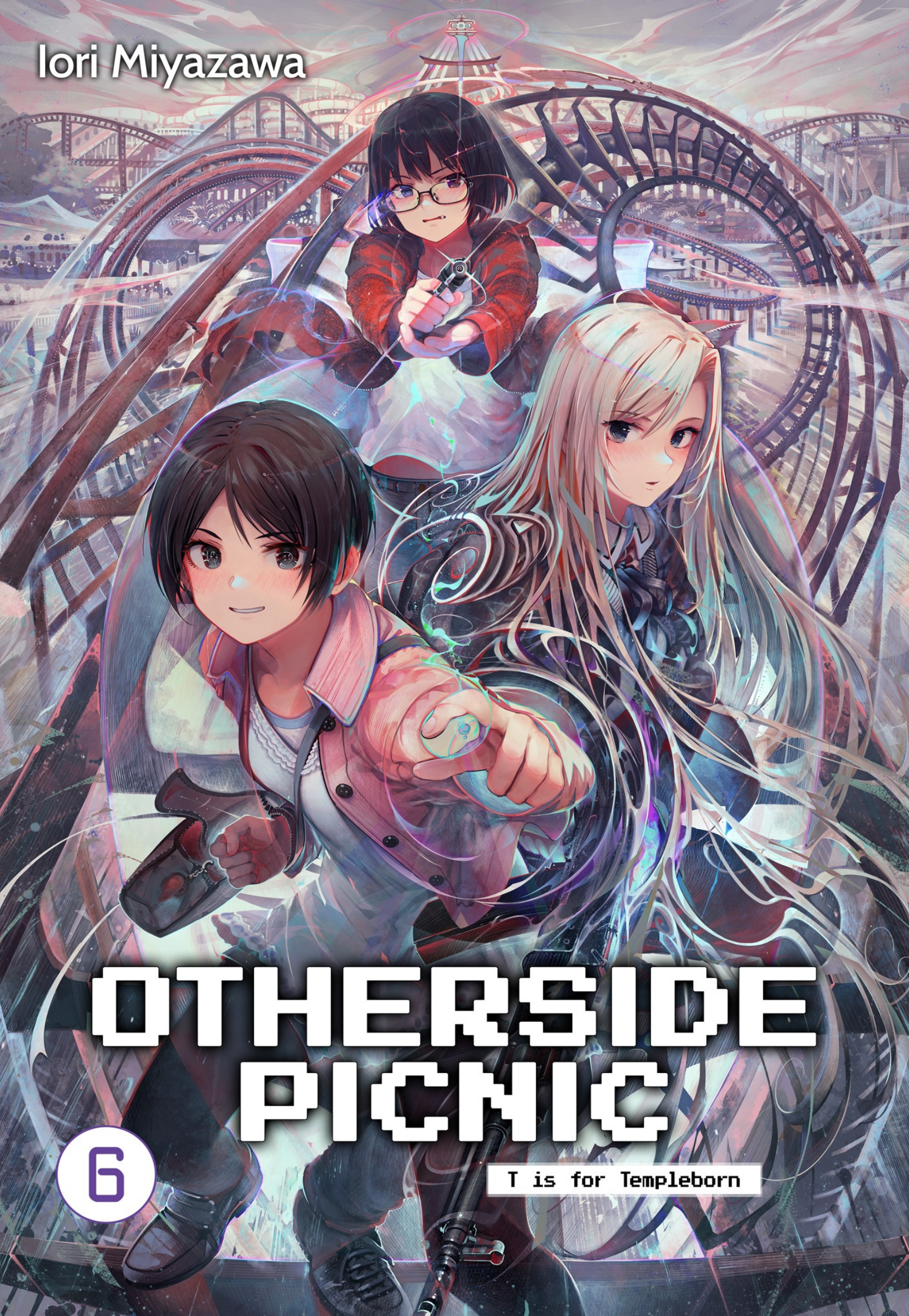




Iori Miyazawa

OTHERSIDE PICNIC

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T is for Templeborn





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File 20: T is for Templeborn

1

I closed my apartment door, hurriedly locking it behind me as I rushed off to the university.

I had woken up and then sat around foggy-headed until it was after I was supposed to have left. It was my own fault for letting my guard down because I only had afternoon classes today, but there was something wrong with my eye, and it took me longer than I thought it would to get ready.

It's a ten-minute walk to the university. By the time I got out the door, it was eight minutes before class started. I ran around corner after corner in the tight streets of the residential district where I lived, dodging cars and gasping for breath. The weather was warm for the start of April, so even if I managed to get there just shy of being late, I was going to be drenched with sweat. That wouldn't be so bad if I was just going to hide out in the back of a huge lecture hall, but this was a seminar held in a tiny classroom with only a small number of other students.

My name is Sorawo Kamikoshi. I'm just a plain, ordinary student attending university in Saitama. I entered my third year this April.

For my third-year seminar, I chose the cultural anthropology course, just like I had been vaguely intending to since coming to university. The first class was last week, and I'd already met my professor and the other students. Shy as I was, I'd felt pretty tense about it. It was so bad I could barely remember what we talked about.

Running through the front gate of the school, I rushed past the bus station, and towards the School of General Education building.

"Ah...!" In my haste, I tripped over the curb. I pitched forward with no time to catch my balance.

Unexpectedly, someone caught me on my way down.

“Whoa! You okay?”

“I-I’m sorry, I—!” I looked up, flustered by what had just happened, and when I saw my savior, I fell silent despite myself.

Golden hair, pale skin. Indigo eyes looking out from beneath long lashes. Long arms and legs, and a body with proportions you could tell were perfect even with her clothes on. She was ridiculously beautiful. It was like she’d walked out of a painting. For some reason, she was wearing a black glove on just her left hand. That fit her mysterious persona oddly well.

She’s so pretty...

I was so busy gawking at her that I forgot to say “thank you.” As she looked down at me, her brow furrowed with concern.

“What happened to your eye, Sorawo?”

When she asked that, I unconsciously reached for the eyepatch over my right eye. My vision had suddenly gone blurry last week. Life with only one eye took some getting used to, and that was part of why I’d just tripped.

“Oh, it’s no big deal. I’m fine.”

“‘I’m fine’...?” Her brow furrowed.

“See! I knew there’s something weird with you, Kamikoshi-senpai,” said the short-haired girl who appeared from behind the blonde.

It was the girl who had tried to talk to me in the cafeteria last week. She called me Senpai, but I didn’t know her. I told her she’d mistaken me for someone else, but she kept stubbornly following me around, so I got scared and ran away.

“You haven’t been answering your phone either... Not that that’s anything new. When I come to see you in person, you just keep walking, like you don’t even know me. The first time it happened, I genuinely thought I had the wrong person. When I tried to talk to you, you were completely out of it, then you ran away. Do you have amnesia or something...?”

Then the short-haired girl let out an “Ah!” as if suddenly realizing something,

then covered her mouth. In a slight whisper, she continued.

“Don’t tell me you’re still worried about the whole nude dancing thing? If that’s what this is about...um, it’s okay. I mean, we’d all been drinking. Nobody remembers it all that well.”

Nude dancing? She *definitely* had the wrong person. I’d never do something like that.

“G...Get out of my way! I’m gonna be late to class!”

When I pushed her aside, the blonde got out of my way with surprisingly little resistance. I don’t know who they’d mistaken me for, but I didn’t have time for this. Anyway, I took off running, and tried to focus on getting to class. When I reached the doors to the building, I turned to look behind me and that pair of strangers were still just standing there, looking confused.

I was the one who ought to be confused, though.



Fortunately, the elevator was waiting when I got to it, so I pressed the button for the third floor where the seminar room was. As the door closed, I slumped against the wall. I tried to catch my breath during the short elevator ride and sort through what had just happened in my head.

It wasn't just the girl who called me Senpai this time. The blonde had acted like she knew me too. What was up with that? Did I have a look-alike running around? That seemed like the most reasonable explanation.

But...

"Sorawo, what happened to your eye?"

That girl...she'd used my name.

The short-haired one that called me "Kamikoshi-senpai" had too.

Had I met them...somewhere?

"That can't be right..."

No matter how out of it I was, or how disinterested I was in other people, I'd never forget meeting someone so ridiculously gorgeous. In fact, despite having only seen it briefly just now, her face was already seared into my brain.

When I closed my eyes, there she was in the darkness behind my eyelids, looking at me with concern. Even though it was only a memory, I felt restless, and opened my eyes. When she looked at me like that, there was nothing I could do...

The elevator arrived on the third floor. I raced out before the doors finished opening, dashed down the hall, and sprang through the open door to the seminar room. The wall clock read half past one, on the dot. I'd made it just in time, but the professor and the students were all already seated, so my last-minute mad dash was still embarrassing. But still, while they all sort of stared at me the moment I came in, no one said anything. Relieved, I sat down in an open seat. There were twelve students, myself included.

The room was well lit, with large windows. Behind me were steel bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling, crammed tight with both Japanese and foreign books. We sat in pipe chairs around some tables that were laid out in a

square.

Once I had pulled everything I would need to take notes out of my bag, I was finally able to settle down.

Then, as if he had been waiting...

"It looks like it's time. Let's get started, then," the professor said casually.

His name was Abekawa. He was the head of this university's Department of Cultural Anthropology. He was a young, well-groomed man who wore a suit, tie, and silver-rimmed glasses. At a glance, he looked like an employee at a major company. His face was pretty heavily tanned, though. That spoke to how much time he spent outdoors.

"Last time we met, the discussion largely centered around what we, the professors, will require of you. I asked you all to introduce yourselves briefly, but there was little time for you to touch on your own focus and interests. Here in this cultural anthropology seminar, you will each dig into a theme of your own choosing, and ultimately produce a graduation thesis. This will be a valuable opportunity to exchange opinions with your fellow students, so please do not hold back when you speak to one another. The same goes for when you speak to me. Now, I'd like to hear what themes each of you plan to explore. We'll go clockwise, starting from me. Go ahead. You may remain seated."

"Oh! Okay!" the student who had suddenly been called on replied. He was a placid boy who looked like he belonged in the humanities.

"I'm Arayama. Um, my topic is still pretty vague..."

"That's quite all right."

"Okay, well, I'm interested in African culture, particularly their cuisine..."

"You did mention that. What was it that aroused your interest in it?"

"Well, when I was in high school, we had a transfer student from Rwanda. When we asked him to make some of his national cuisine for the culture festival, he was really troubled. He said there was no Rwandan food worth making for us. But when I asked for more details, that wasn't true at all. He taught me about some genuine Rwandan home cooking. He never really

seemed convinced it was worth sharing, though. Now, if I was in a foreign country, and people asked me to share Japanese food, I'm sure that I could come up with something. Maybe sushi, or sukiyaki, or something like that. So, it occurred to me, maybe the way they think about the food of their homeland is completely different. And that's what got me into it."

"Hmm, I see. That is interesting. So you developed an interest in African cuisine, but instead of a cook, you chose to become a cultural anthropologist. Why is that?"

"Huh...? Now that you mention it...I don't know that I've ever thought about that."

"That may be a key point. For you, food was not, primarily, something that you 'make.' Now, why is that...? Even among fellow Japanese people, the way that you think about food, and the way that mothers who have to prepare food for their families every day think about food may be completely different. If you limit your study to how Japanese people and Rwandan people think about food, it won't be that interesting. I'm sure this was drilled into all of you during your first two years, but Ethnography, the way we investigate questions in cultural anthropology, places great value on the researcher's personal experience. That is the greatest difference between our field and sociology or other fields that study modern society. So, Arayama-kun, your own approach to food is something that transcends a single individual's intuition. It is at the core of your theme. I think it will be interesting."

From there, the discussion continued with the topic of food as culture. Like how, in the modern day, ramen and curry are totally Japanese dishes, but if you're asked to introduce Japanese cuisine to foreigners, are they what would come to mind? Or how ramen is presented as a Japanese dish overseas. Or how the Rwandan genocide might have influenced their cuisine. Or how, in China, the Cultural Revolution resulted in the suppression of many traditional dishes, but they weren't lost completely... Once the discussion had spiraled off in all sorts of directions, we moved on to the next person.

I sat there in silence as the other students took turns talking about what interested them, or commenting on others' topics. I was impressed by how much they could all talk. Even the first guy, despite saying he only had a vague

idea of his theme, had a proper story for how he'd gotten into it...

I nervously waited until, finally, my own turn came around.

"Okay, next."

"Ah... I'm Kamikoshi. Mine's still super vague, but..."

"Sure, go ahead."

"How about studying cuteness...? You know how each culture thinks different things are cute? I mean, the taste in characters is totally different in each country. But recently Japanese characters have started to become more popular in other countries. Like Hello Kitty. I was thinking that maybe things have changed..."

That was a palpable confusion in the room. The other students, who had shown no real interest in me up until this point, all stared at me with evident surprise. So did Professor Abekawa. I trailed off, bewildered.

"Um... Is something wrong?"

"You *are* Kamikoshi, right?"

"Uh, yes?"

"You don't want to do ghost stories?"

"Huh...?"

"In your introduction last week, you said you were interested in true ghost stories. Every year, there's someone who wants to do youkai, so I was talking with the other professors about how our youkai specialist this year was fresh and interesting."

"You...were?"

Was that what I talked about last time? I must have been really tense or something. My memory of it was kind of vague.

"I do think that cuteness is an interesting topic in its own right, but you've always been interested in true ghost stories, haven't you? What brought on this change of heart?"

"Erm..."

“Some folklorists are fed up with the tendency to immediately associate the study of folklore with youkai, so they might tell their students they can’t study them, but...we’re not like that here. Because cultural anthropology is a field where you can study anything that humans do. If you’re satisfied with this change of topic, it’s fine, but if you are still struggling to decide, I think you should give it careful thought.”

A number of students around the table nodded in agreement.

“It sounded pretty neat when you were talking about it last time.”

“Yeah. I mean, I never even knew that ‘true ghost stories’ was a genre.”

“I used to read collections of scary stories from the internet all the time, so hearing you talk about it really took me back.”

I was perplexed by this unexpected show of support. Up until now, I’d just assumed they thought I was a weirdo.

It was true that I was interested in true ghost stories. Judging by what everyone was saying, I must have talked about that during our seminar last week. Yet, for some reason, I’d removed it from my list of potential themes...

Why?

My hand unconsciously reached for the eye patch over my right eye.

Something felt wrong. How long had my eye been like this?

Since last week.

When last week?

When was it? I didn’t know. How was it on the day of the seminar? What about before then?

How could this be? Losing sight in my dominant eye should have been a huge deal, and yet I couldn’t remember it happening.

That blonde flashed through my mind again.

She talked as if she knew me.

Had we met last week, maybe?

Did something happen to me at last week's seminar?

If so, then what...?

In the middle of my confusion, I suddenly felt eyes on me, and looked up.

One of the students sitting across from me diagonally was staring.

He was a guy with close-cropped hair. His posture was weirdly good. I probably recognized him because he'd been at the last seminar too, but he left a stronger impression than the other students. Did we talk? I felt like he'd said something to me after the seminar, as I was leaving the classroom... No, was that a dream?

When our eyes met, he blinked before looking away.

My head felt kinda fuzzy. It was like there was a fog over part of my brain. As I struggled to remember despite that, a certain word surfaced from my memories.

That's right. He said he was *Templeborn*...

2

Templeborn... Templeborn...?

I walked through the hall, cocking my head to the side in thought.

What did that mean? What was so special about having been born in a temple?

Did he introduce himself during the previous seminar? I feel like he did. I mean, if you think about it, he must have. It was the first class. Maybe he said it then.

Since he was born in a temple, he was going to make religion his theme? No, he didn't say anything about that during today's seminar. He was doing something more normal, like...

"Huh...?" I came to a stop, confused.

What *did* that guy say he was doing?

I could remember what the other students said they'd chosen as their theme if I tried. They'd all been pretty interesting, after all.

The first guy was interested in African cuisine, and the guy who went after him was doing concepts of beauty and ugliness. Next was the sociology student who was interested in the culture of temporary workers and full-time employees, and after that was...Twitter as a cross-cultural intersection, I think? After that was the fan communities of the male idols of each nation in Asia, then me, and then games as a tool for communication, and then, uh, next was that thing, and next was...

"Huh? Uh, what was 'that thing'?"

I couldn't remember. I had no recollection of what the Templeborn guy had said.

I remembered what the people before and after him said. But what about him, sandwiched in between them...?

I imagined that guy sitting there, silent, while everyone else was talking. Like no one else could see him.

Nah, that couldn't be right...

I closed my eyes tight, trying to conjure up that scene from memory. They wouldn't just skip over him. He had to have said something.

I tried to imagine him speaking to everyone. Was the way he spoke boyish, masculine, polite? Well, what really mattered was the fact that he had to have spoken about his interests and the theme of his research. How did the professor and the other students react?

I couldn't remember a thing...

The scene in my mind changed, this time to one where only he talked, and the others stared at him with no expression, as if they were staring into the void...

It creeped me out so much I opened my eyes.

"Weird..."

I shook my head back and forth. I'd imagined that scene out of nowhere, and then gotten freaked out all on my own.

I was the only one left in the halls here, which were kind of gloomy even in the middle of the day. Feeling uneasy somehow, I started to walk, rushing down the stairs.

If I was going to act like this, then I should have just tried to talk to Templeborn-kun after class. But how would I have struck up a conversation? *“Hey, you’re that Templeborn guy, right?”* Like, who would even say that? Well, the fact of the matter was that Templeborn-kun cleared out of there right away, so I wouldn’t have had the chance anyway.

I walked down to the first floor and headed outside. It was reassuring to be in a place with other people, but I still felt out of sorts. Was there something I’d forgotten? Come to think of it, I still had no clue what was up with those two I ran into before class, and— “Ah!”

I had been looking down as I walked, but now I raised my face to look around. I’d been careless. If those two were still convinced that I was someone else, they might come after me again. It wouldn’t be surprising if they were waiting to ambush me after class.

But contrary to my expectations, they were nowhere to be seen. Hopefully, they’d given up, or the misunderstanding had been resolved. I walked a little quicker, hoping I’d be able to get back home before anything else weird happened. The seminar that just ended was the only class I had to attend today.

I ate soba with mountain vegetables in the cafeteria, and bought some sweet buns from the store. My wallet was more flush with cash than I would have expected. Weird. There were five 10,000 yen bills in there. Had I just made a withdrawal? Did I usually walk around with this much? Come to think of it, how much was in my account now? I couldn’t remember off the top of my head, but I had a feeling that I wasn’t in a particularly tight spot financially.

Huh?

Was that right? Uh...

“Hrm...?”

I cocked my head to the side as I walked out the gate, and headed down the road the buses used on my way home. It was an arterial road in the suburbs,

and always busy. There were large trucks whipping past me.

As I walked along the sidewalk, thinking to myself, a woman in a red dress was walking towards me. She was pretty, and caught my attention. Then again, that blonde girl had been gorgeous too. Still, that red dress stood out. You needed confidence to pull off a look like that.

I was so focused on the woman walking towards me that I jumped into the air when someone suddenly honked their horn behind me.

Without realizing it I had wandered out into the road. As I hurriedly returned to the sidewalk, the luxury car that passed me turned on its blinkers and came to a stop just ahead.

Whoops, I was totally out of it. I couldn't complain if that guy was mad at me...

I was planning to apologize, but then the door opened, and a tall man stepped out. He was thin, but not in a way that made him seem weak. I got the impression the man was very flexible. He wore a tailored three-piece suit, and his arms were covered in tattoos...

A yakuza...?!

My blood ran cold as I realized things had just gotten real bad. The man walked over, looked down at me. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry! I should have been paying attention!"

"No, Kamikoshi-san—"

"Uh, yes?!"

This guy was calling me by name too! Why?!

As I panicked, the back door of the car opened, and another person stepped out. The blonde from before! She strode over, walking past the yakuza to stand in front of me.

"Come with us."

"Huh? What are you talking—"

"Just do it."

She seized me by the arm, and dragged me towards the car. *I'm being abducted!* I dug my heels in and tried to resist.

“Stop! Let go of me!”

“Please, Sorawo, just calm down and listen to—”

I grabbed the tote bag hanging from my shoulder and went to swing it at her as hard as I could. It was heavy, full of textbooks and stuff, so I figured it'd make her back off, but because of the weight, I couldn't lift it very well. It came in at a much lower angle than I expected, slamming hard into her waist.

“Urgh...” The blonde groaned, but she didn't let go of my hand. I was going to go for another swing, but the momentum caused something to slip out of my bag, and it fell to the street with a clatter.

My eyes were drawn to the black luster of the hunk of metal now lying on the asphalt.

It was a gun, sticking halfway out of a khaki holster.

A gun...?

Did a gun just come out of my bag?

As I stiffened, unable to keep up with the events that were unfolding, the yakuza quickly crouched down and picked up the weapon. For a moment, I thought I was about to get shot, but he left it in the holster, holding it so that no one would see.

“Why is there a gun...?” I mumbled in a daze.

“That's *your* gun, Sorawo,” the blonde told me.

It made no sense, and I just sort of stared at her. With a terrifyingly serious expression on her face, she continued.

“Listen. You're not in your right mind now, Sorawo. I think you're suffering from amnesia.”

“Am...nesia...?”

“I'm not your enemy. Trust me.”

I stood there stunned for a moment, unable to look away from the pleading

look on her face.

Amnesia? Me...?

Sure, that would explain some things. Actually, there were a whole lot of things that made no sense otherwise. My right eye which I'd gone blind in but couldn't remember when, my research thesis which had changed at some point without me realizing it, the strangers who seemed to know me...and, as the finishing blow, the gun that was in my bag for some reason.

I spoke slowly and cautiously as I tried to sort through it all inside my head.

"Okay, so...what are you, then?"

"Huh?"

"If you're not my enemy, then what are you to me?"

Her grip on my arm tightened. Then, in an angry tone, she said, "We have the closest kind of relationship in the world."

"Huh...?" I was taken aback. That was a heavier response than I'd expected. "We...do?"

"Yes!" she suddenly snapped at me.

What was her problem...? She was pretty, but also scary. Was she from a yakuza family or something?

With an irritated glare, the blonde pulled my arm again.

"Just get in the car already! We need to get you checked at the hospital!"

"Uh, but..."

"No buts! If you hit your head or something, that's serious! Come on!"

Even if I'd taken a blow to the head, I wasn't stupid enough to get in a yakuza's car. The normal thing to do was either run, or call for help. If I really wanted to go to a hospital, I could do that myself.

What made me hesitate was the look in her eyes. Although she seemed irritated, her drooping eyebrows and moist eyes told me she was incredibly concerned about me.

“Okay...” I nodded hesitantly, and I could feel her grip loosen.

“Get in...” she said again, and I reluctantly let her lead me into the back seat.

The yakuza returned to the driver’s seat, and politely informed me, “I will be taking custody of your firearm. It will be returned to you once you’ve regained your memory.”

“R-Right...”

The door closed and locked, and then the car drove off.

The blonde was still holding my arm. I could feel her staring at the side of my face the whole time. She seemed worried I was still going to try and escape. If things seemed dicey, I planned to throw myself out of the car at an intersection, so she was right to be.

“Um, my hand hurts,” I tried complaining, but that only made her more worried. She tightened her grip without another word. Maybe I should have kept my stupid mouth shut.

My name is Sorawo Kamikoshi. I’m just a plain, ordinary student attending university in Saitama.

Or at least that’s how it was supposed to be.

What in the world’s gonna happen to me...?

3

The car’s powerful engine roared as we got onto the highway. I looked at the GPS; we were headed towards the center of the city. The blonde and the yakuza were both totally silent, so I did my best to endure the awkwardness for the forty or so minutes it took before we finally entered an underground parking garage.

“After you,” the yakuza said, unlocking the car doors. I was apparently expected to get out on my own, so I stepped out of the car onto the nondescript concrete. The blonde got out too, still holding my arm.

The yakuza went on ahead to the elevator. He waited for the two of us to

follow, and then pressed the “Close Door” button once we were inside. Using a small key, he opened a panel beneath the buttons, using the buttons inside it to operate the elevator. Once we began ascending, the panel closed again.

“This is a hospital...right?”

The building I saw outside before we entered the garage did say something about health insurance in its name, but the parking lot had been practically deserted, and it didn’t *feel* much like a hospital.

“It might be more accurate to call this a private medical facility,” the yakuza replied politely.

“So it’s not a hospital, then,” I said firmly, and the blonde interjected.

“It’s fine.”

“How is this fi—”

“Nobody here is your enemy, Sorawo. Trust me.”

I was put off by her pleading tone. I don’t know how I was supposed to trust her when she hadn’t given me any reason I should, though...

The elevator stopped on a floor with white walls that shone brightly under the fluorescent lights. A chemical smell assaulted my nostrils. I could be reasonably convinced that this was a medical facility, at least.

“This way,” said the yakuza.

I followed him into an examination room. A man in a white coat who was sitting at the desk there looked up when we entered. His head was smooth, and he wore glasses. From the way he dressed, I could assume he was a doctor.

“Hey, Kamikoshi-san. Have a seat,” the doctor greeted me casually. I slowly sat down in the chair he’d indicated.

“So...you know me too, huh?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve examined you a number of times before. I hear you’ve lost your memories?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

The yakuza and the blonde didn’t leave the room. They stood next to the wall,

watching me. Their eyes made it hard to relax.

“What happened to your eye?” the doctor asked.

“I couldn’t see with it...”

“When did that start?”

“Last week, probably...?”

“You don’t remember that either?”

“Not very well.”

“Did you go to the hospital?”

“No, not yet.”

“Why not?”

I vaguely shook my head. I wasn’t entirely sure of that myself. Maybe because I didn’t know what caused me to lose my vision, I had been hesitant to try and explain it to other people.

“Would you mind if I took a look? Can you take off the eye patch?”

“Uh, sure.”

As I removed my eye patch, I noticed the blonde leaning in to take a look from the side. She gulped.

“Your eye color...!” said the blonde.

“Hrm,” the doctor grunted. He had a difficult look on his face as he brought a penlight up close to my right eye. It didn’t feel bright. “Your right iris is drained of color... It was so blue before, but now it’s gray.”

“Blue?” I asked.

“Yes. Here’s how it was a little while ago.”

In most of the photos he showed me, the blue was so deep it seemed artificial.

“This is my eye...?”

“You said this started last week. Did you hit it? Or were you experiencing any

sort of illness or off-feeling?”

“No, nothing.”

I heard running in the hall, and then the door to the examination room was flung open as a short woman rushed in. I thought she was a child, but she wore an adult’s spring coat. As she turned to look at me, her eyes widened.

“Sorawo-chan! What happened to you?!”

Oh, look. Another person who knows me.

“Uh, hi...” I said, bowing politely. The woman now looked even more disturbed. Had that been the wrong response?

“I was having trouble getting in touch, and then this happens... Why didn’t you answer your phone? Even if you have no memories, you could still have taken my call, couldn’t you?” the short woman asked.

The blonde nodded in enthusiastic agreement. Had both of them been trying to contact me?

“I’m sorry, um... It’s ‘cause I was scared...”

“Of what?” the short woman asked.

“My phone was full of nothing but numbers and names I don’t know, and that really freaked me out. I turned it off and haven’t touched it since.”

“Oh, so that’s why...” The blonde seemed satisfied with that explanation.

With all of us making a lot of noise in his examination room, the doctor raised his hand to speak. “Save the talk for later. I want to run some tests first. Do you mind, Kamikoshi-san?”

“How much is this going to cost?” I asked.

The doctor seemed caught off guard by the question, but he immediately lowered his voice and, in an exaggerated whisper, told me, “If you’ll do it now, it’s free.”

“Okay, let’s do it.”

The doctor shooed everyone else out of the room so we could get started. I got changed into a patient gown, and we started with all the usual health

checkup stuff like drawing blood, testing blood pressure, and taking X-rays. After that, I was led around to a number of different rooms. They took pictures of cross sections of my head with a large, donut-shaped machine, and had me look into a machine with a lens that did things like flash lights at me and blow air at my eye... A nurse who seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere helped with all of this, so in between the tests, I asked if she knew me.

“Yes, of course. We’ve met a number of times,” the nurse said.

“Oh, I see...”

“You rushed in here with your guns once to save us, you know. It was very cool.”

I did what now...?

I think it took more than an hour to get through all of the tests and questions. When I returned to the chair in the examination room and sat across from the doctor, the blonde, the yakuza, and the short woman were all there.

The doctor, who had been glaring at the test results on a large display, furrowed his brow as he turned to look at me.

“In regards to your eyes...you’ve lost vision in your right eye. The strange thing about it, though, is that there’s nothing unusual about that eye aside from the loss of color in your iris. It’s not injured, and the lens, optic nerve, and conjunctiva all show no sign of illness. The color’s just drained away, and now you’re blind.”

“Blind...”

It was a heavy word, now that I heard him say it.

“I didn’t find anything unusual with the rest of your body either. There were no signs of apoplexy, cerebral hemorrhaging, or hematoma, and no trace of any blunt trauma to the head. You’re the picture of health, the same as the last time I saw you.”

“But she’s lost her memory?” the blonde asked, causing the doctor to put on a difficult expression.

“During consultation, we confirmed that she doesn’t remember anyone here,

the existence of DS Research, or anything to do with the UBL. But there didn't seem to be any problems with her memories of university or her daily life. It's partial amnesia—or selective, rather.”

“What's the cause?” I asked.

“There's no brain damage, and while you've lost vision in one eye, there aren't signs of paralysis anywhere else, so we can likely rule out a vascular cause as well. It depends on how you look at the slight impairment in reasoning and judgment, but... It's possible to have a concussion without external injuries, so if that's what happened, it's just a matter of waiting for you to recover, but there is also the possibility of early-onset dementia. It's a difficult case, but if you need me to make a diagnosis, I suspect dementia with Lewy bodies and recommend a detailed examination.”

“Dementia...?!” I exclaimed.

Okay, that was a shock. Not only had I lost my vision, I had dementia too? At my age?

“Sorawo...”

The blonde came closer, taking my hand as she looked at me with moist eyes. I looked up at her, feeling forlorn.

“You don't remember me at all?” she asked.

“Yeah...” I answered honestly. The blonde looked like she was going to cry. She was really worried—for me. I was still having a hard time believing I'd been close to such a beautiful girl, but everything from the way she looked at me to the way she interacted with me was filled with concern. It didn't feel like she was lying to me.

The short woman's brow furrowed too. There was a bitter look on her face. She seemed worried, but also angry. At me, maybe? I don't know.

“You and I were really close, right?”

When I asked her that, the blonde gulped. “Yeah...”

“I'm sorry for not remembering.”

“No...” The blonde shook her head. I kept talking as I tried to sort through my

thoughts.

“The closest kind of relationship in the world... That’s what you said we had, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Does that mean we’re, uh, you know...” I swallowed before hesitantly asking, “Going out, or something, maybe?”

“Huh...?” The blonde stiffened. She just stopped still, not even blinking as she looked at me.

“H-Huh? Was that not it? I figured it was something like—”

“Why did you think that?” the blonde asked, impassive, her eyes fixed on me.

“Uh, well, if it’s the closest kind of relationship in the world... I was guessing that we were lovers, maybe?”

The strength drained from her hand and it fell away from mine.

“Huh...?”

As she gazed at me, speechless, I got scared.

“Um...”

The next instant, there was a shock to the left side of my face. It took a while before I realized I’d been slapped.

“Nishina-san...?”

“Hey, what’s wrong with you?!”

The yakuza and the short woman shouted from behind her, but it looked like the blonde couldn’t hear them. She looked at me with a sort of dazed expression on her face, the hand she’d slapped me with still raised.

She swung it again, whacking me in the side of the head.

“Ow...! What gives?!” I shouted, rising to my feet. The blonde grabbed me.

“Stop! What?!” I protested.

I wasn’t so much angry as confused. She’d had this bewildered look on her face the whole time, and I had no idea how I was supposed to react. Instead of

getting angry over her slapping me, I got scared because I had no idea what was making her do it.

“Nishina-san, what has gotten into you?” the yakuza asked as he placed his hands on her shoulders from behind. The blonde didn’t even turn to look at him.

“Sorawo’s broken,” she mumbled before slapping me again with an open hand. I think she was aiming for my head, but couldn’t reach because the yakuza was holding her shoulders. Instead, her hand pressed against my face with limited force.

“Mmph...!”

As I turned my face to the side and shook her off of me, my anger finally caught up.

“That hurts! Let go!” I shouted angrily, slapping away the arm that kept stubbornly reaching out towards me.

“Calm down, you idiot! What are you fighting here for?!”

The short woman rushed forward, putting herself between the blonde and me. That didn’t stop the blonde from still trying to slap me.

“Because she’s broken...” the blonde said with empty eyes.

“Well, hitting her’s not going to fix it! She’s not a vintage electrical appliance, okay?!”

“You don’t know that! Maybe it will! I mean—”

The blonde stopped mid sentence, as if she had suddenly realized something. An expression returned to her dazed face. As she blinked repeatedly, her eyes, which had seemed to be looking nowhere in particular before, regained focus.

“I mean, I’ve fixed her before!” she declared, pulling the glove from her left hand. I doubted my own eyes when I saw the translucent hand that revealed. It was a beautiful, clear hand, made of some material that was neither glass nor water.

Everyone stared as she raised her left hand up high, and...

Slapped my right cheek again.

“Ow! Why you...!”

“I told you to cut that out! I understand how you feel, but knock it off!”

“Nishina-san, please, calm yourself.”

“Yeah! If you keep hitting me in the head—”

There was a lot of yelling and a scuffle seemed ready to break out until the blonde shouted, “Shut up!”

The tension in her voice made the whole room fall silent.

“Be quiet,” she said in a more subdued tone. “Let me focus.”

The blonde pressed me against the wall.

“Hey! Don’t push me!” I protested.

The blonde, standing a head taller than me, looked down. “Stay put, Sorawo.”

“Huh? What?”

“I’m going to touch you with my left hand, so don’t move.”

“What are you trying to—”

She pushed me against the wall, paying no heed to my words. Her translucent left hand came closer, but slowly this time. What was going on with that thing? Were the lights I saw dancing inside it an illusion?

Her hand touched my face.

“Eek!”

It’s cold! My body tried to recoil, but the wall was behind me.

“Stay still.”

She held me in place with her right hand as her left crawled across my face. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be focusing on the feelings in her palm.

“It’s...not inside...but it feels like...there’s something there...”

She was mumbling nonsense. It didn’t sound like she was talking to me.

“No...? That’s not it... Is something missing...?”

What is she even doing...? I wondered.

Everyone else seemed too dumbfounded to stop the blonde. As I watched with some trepidation, her fingers pried my right eye wide open. I started to panic, for obvious reasons.

“Whoa! Hold up! That’s my eye!”

“Suck it up.”

“You’re kidding me, right?!”

The terrifying thing is: she was serious. A cold finger passed between my eyelids to touch the surface of my eyeball. I involuntarily cringed.

Huh...?

It didn’t hurt. I felt a goopy sensation from the surface of my eye, but that was all.

Had I lost my sense of pain along with my vision? I stood there, helpless, as she slowly touched my eyeball. While it didn’t exactly hurt, the unfamiliar sensation was giving me goosebumps.

Then, I felt something even more horrifying.

The finger that had been stroking the surface of my eyeball pushed inside.

“Ahhh!”

I let out an involuntary scream. *Her finger’s in my eye!* I couldn’t see it myself, but based on how it felt, I couldn’t imagine it being anything else. It still didn’t hurt, but that wasn’t the problem here. There are some things you just don’t do!

“What’re you doing?! Stop!”

“Shut up! Don’t move!”

When I panicked and started shouting, the blonde yelled at me as if *she* was the one who had any right to be upset here.

Seriously, what’s her problem...?!

Her finger probed the inside of my eyeball. It sunk deeper inside my head...
Whoa, hold on, has she reached my brain?!

When that thought occurred to me, and I was about ready to pass out, I heard the blonde whisper, “Found it...”

I felt her fingers twist around even deeper inside my eye.

There was this soft sensation, like something had been released. It was almost like when you undo a particularly tight knot in a plastic bag.

The contents of that bag came gushing out. A bubbling, popping sensation like carbonated water spread through the right side of my face. It was like that pins and needles sensation in a leg that’s gone numb. The sensation left me gasping as she extracted her finger.

“Guh...!”

The pain came back at the same time as that intense numbness. It was like when you got an eyelash in your eye. I held my face and doubled over. An endless stream of tears gushed from my right eye.

The pain gradually receded as I stayed put. It was still throbbing, but it wasn’t so bad I couldn’t open my eye. I hesitantly did so.

“Ah...”

I saw my own hand in my teary vision.

My right eye...it could see.

As I looked up, the name of the first woman to enter my vision slipped from my lips.

“You’re Toriko...”

Toriko let out a gasp, staggering, then plopped herself down in the chair I had been sitting in just a little earlier.

“Sorawo-chan...? Did your memory come back...?”

I looked around, trying to respond to Kozakura, but there was another sharp pain, and I covered my eye.

“Wh...What’s going on with my eye?”

As I stumbled, Migiwa lent me some support, then helped me to sit down on the examination table.

The doctor moved my hand aside and shone a light into my right eye.

“It’s healed...if you can call it that, in this situation,” the doctor said, still sounding only half-convinced. When I looked into the mirror he gave me, my iris had regained its aberrant blue color. The white of the eye was bloodshot, and the area around it was swollen, probably because of the finger that had been shoved in there.

“You can see, right?”

“I can.”

“And how about your memory? Do you know who we are?”

“Yes.”

I looked at the faces in the examination room. Toriko, Kozakura, Migiwa, and...

“Huh...?”

“Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry, um, I can remember everyone but you and your nurse’s names.”

“Yeah... We may not have ever introduced ourselves.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fine then.”

“It is, huh?”

Toriko sat hunched over in the chair, still looking totally out of it. Her breathing was shallow, and she looked, wordlessly, towards me.

“Toriko, what’s wrong...?” I asked, concerned.

Toriko let out a long sigh. “I’m beat...”

“You’re beat?”

“I had to focus super hard...”

Toriko looked down at her left hand. With sluggish movements, she tried to put the glove back over her hand, not having done anything to her finger since

it came out of my eye.

“Ah! You can’t put it in there like that,” the nurse said, hurriedly offering her a disinfectant wipe. She just had to wipe it off? That was the problem here? That seemed kinda weird, but maybe the nurse had lost her composure too. Nobody in the room knew how to react to the nasty violence or the dramatic treatment of my disease.

In an attempt to get things back on track, the doctor spoke up. “For now...I think we should examine your eye once more. To check that it hasn’t been injured...”

4

They gave me another checkup, but my eye was unharmed. Its color had returned, and with it my memories... If I were to try and describe what had happened, I could only say, “I got better.” Nothing unusual showed up in the new cross-sectional images they took of my head either.

“That finger must have been all the way into her brain, though...” the doctor mumbled to himself as he stared at the monochrome images. “I’m going to prescribe some anti-bacterial eye drops, just to be safe. Get some rest, and we’ll see how things develop. If anything feels strange, contact us immediately.”

“Strange how...?”

“An off-feeling in your eyes, headaches, dizziness, nausea, fainting spells, fatigue, sluggishness...”

“Even if I just feel sluggish? Isn’t that setting the bar a little low?”

“Listen, the eyes are almost like a part of the brain that’s been exposed to the outside. People die from a single blood vessel in the brain bursting, so we have to take even minor symptoms seriously.”

“Uh, sure...”

For some reason, I got a whole lecture before he finally let me go.

As I left the examination room, said my thanks, and closed the door, I couldn’t help but think, *They were all super concerned about my eye and brain, but no*

one was worried about all the times I got slapped in the face. I mean, sure, they had bigger things to worry about. I get it. But you just don't hit a person's face like that...

As I walked towards the lobby in front of the elevator, feeling disgruntled, Toriko, Kozakura, and Migiwa who were sitting in the waiting room all turned to look at me.

"Sorawo!" Toriko shouted as she got up and ran over and hug me.

I awkwardly returned the embrace. It seemed like the appropriate thing to do.

"Sorry for worrying you," I said.

"You better be."

"Oh, and thanks... For healing me."

I thanked her and tried to move away, but Toriko held on and wouldn't let me go.

Uh... What am I supposed to do in this situation? Do I hug her back tighter? But Kozakura and Migiwa are looking. That'd be embarrassing.

For lack of a better option, I tried slapping Toriko lightly on the back. She didn't get mad, so it probably wasn't the totally wrong response.

"How did you know what to do?" I asked.

"I just did what came naturally..." Toriko replied, her face still buried in my shoulder. It tickled my neck when she spoke there.

"It was natural...for you to plunge your finger into my eye?"

"I dunno... When I was touching your face, my finger sort of started probing on its own."

"Oh, okay... Can I ask one more question?"

"Sure."

"Why did you hit me?"

Toriko tensed up.

"Well?"

“I mean, you were acting weird, Sorawo.”

“I’m sure I was, but you were acting pretty weird yourself.”

“It fixed you before.”

“When?”

“With the Kunekune.”

I hadn’t expected her to say that, so I was confused. Thinking back, she was right. When I looked directly at the Kunekune and started going insane, Toriko had slapped me to my senses.

“Th-That doesn’t mean you should just do it out of nowhere...”

“What, then? Do you want me to apologize?”

“Huh?”

Toriko suddenly let go of my arm, moving away and looking down at me with a cold expression on her face.

“What... What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Sorawo, do you remember what you said?”

“Huh...?”

Before she hit me? What did I say?

Erm...

...

We looked at one another for a while, neither of us saying a word.

“That...doesn’t count,” I replied cautiously. Toriko nodded, letting no expression show on her face as she did.

Toriko headed back to her seat and I followed. I plopped myself down next to her.

“What did the doctor have to say?” Kozakura, who was sitting across from us, asked.

“He didn’t find anything particularly wrong with me.”

When I gave her the short version, Kozakura frowned skeptically. “Really?”

“He did give me some eye drops, though.”

Kozakura looked even more incredulous.

“If there are no problems, then that is good,” Migiwa said, looking closely at me as he spoke. “But it is hard to believe after what we saw.”

“What do you mean?”

“It has been a while since I last saw a finger shoved into a human eye.”

Scary.

He must have sensed I was weirded out, because Migiwa tried to recover by adding, “Oh, it was a long time ago. And I only saw it that one time.”

That additional detail didn’t do anything to help. I wondered what happened to the person, but the story was probably not going to be anything I wanted to hear, so I decided not to ask.

“Is your face a little swollen?” Kozakura asked, leaning in to look a little closer.

“Is it obvious?” I asked.

“Not that obvious, but you maybe should put something cold on it.”

“I will go fetch something,” Migiwa said, rising from his seat and then disappearing down the stairs.

I cast a sideways glare at Toriko.

“See. It’s because you hit me so much.”

“Sorry...” This time she meekly apologized, her shoulders slumping in dejection.

“No, I understand. I mean, I get the urge to punch Sorawo-chan pretty often myself.”

“Kozakura-san?”

“But I’m glad you don’t have dementia. Because if you did have dementia with Lewy bodies, that would kind of make sense.”

“The doctor said that too. What is that?”

“I’m sure the doctor could explain it better than me, but...”

Despite saying that, Kozakura did explain.

“Lewy body dementias occur when aggregations of protein called Lewy bodies form in the brain’s nerve cells. There are three major effects. The first is impaired cognitive function. Your ability to understand the situations and conversations you find yourself in is impacted, and you feel dazed a lot of the time. The second is Parkinson’s disease. You experience rigidity of movement, autonomic dysfunction, and difficulty controlling your body. The third...is visual hallucinations.”

“You start seeing things?”

“Yeah. Like a person you don’t know staring at you from the ceiling. Or a mouse, a snake, or some other creepy creature crawling around on your dinner table. Or a dead family member sleeping in your bed...”

Just talking about it must have scared her, because Kozakura shuddered.

“That’s...a lot like a spiritual phenomenon, huh?”

“I know, right? But it’s a hallucination. Even though it feels absolutely real to the person experiencing it. I know I specified visual hallucinations before, but there can be non-visual ones too. The feeling of someone touching you, hearing voices when there’s no one else around, sensing someone standing behind you... You might mistake a stain on the wall, or a wrinkle in the sheets, for someone’s face; the walls or ground might look warped and distorted; you might see a door or staircase that shouldn’t be there; or have a thief that doesn’t exist break into your house and steal your things...”

Toriko, who had been staring at her hand in silence, suddenly looked up.

“Hey, isn’t that like...”

Kozakura smiled faintly. “You noticed? Yeah, that’s right. In the beginning, I suspected that experiences with the Otherside might be caused by dementia with Lewy bodies. In fact, you can explain most ‘spiritual phenomena’ with hallucinations caused by dementia with Lewy bodies. Especially those experienced by elderly folks in the hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, you hear a lot of stories of people seeing something like the grim

reaper when they're on their deathbed," I said, recalling a number of hospital ghost stories I had read. "But it's a little tough to write it *all* off as dementia and hallucinations, don't you think? It's not just the elderly who experience 'spiritual phenomena,' after all. Even if you assume it's because the disease manifested at a young age, it would eventually progress and be discovered."

"Well, yeah. When multiple people experience the same thing at the same time, and there's ample physical evidence, it's going to be impossible to write off the Otherside as a hallucination."

Around that point Migiwa came back and handed me an ice pack wrapped in a wet towel. I pressed it against my face. The cold felt nice against my skin, which was inflamed from being hit.

"So...what happened?" Toriko asked me once we had relaxed a bit longer.

"Yeah, I'm not too sure about that myself," I replied. "Something happened around the same time as my seminar last week, and after that I lost my vision in my right eye, and all my memories of the other world."

"You can't remember what it was?"

"Maybe it's still blocked."

Toriko leaned a little closer to me, so I pulled back.

"You can keep your finger out of my eye, thanks."

"I was just trying to take a look at it."

"Seriously, it's nothing for you to stare at."

While I tried to avoid Toriko looking at my face, Kozakura got angry.

"Take this seriously. It's pretty clear you didn't just hit your head or something. Your right eye...got deactivated, I guess you could say? I've never seen anything like that before. Something serious involving the other world must have happened."

"Well, yeah, I know that. It's just that no matter how hard I think about it, my memories of whatever it was are completely—" I started to say, then realized.

I did remember. Just one thing. One element in my memories was blatantly

out of place.

“It’s T-san,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Who?”

“T-san the Templeborn!”

My sudden shouting earned me a dubious look from Kozakura. She repeated, “T-san the Templeborn...? You mean *that* T-san?”

I nodded.

“That’s right. The Templeborn was in my seminar. I didn’t notice it at all when my memories were gone, but now that I think back, that guy was totally T-san.”

Toriko awkwardly tugged on my sleeve. “Hey, who are you talking about? Someone you know? I’ve never heard of this person before.”

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t have...”

T-san the Templeborn is a famous internet meme. To explain it simply, he’s sort of an anti-ghost-story hero. There’s a bunch of stories, but they all play out in the same way.

First, they start as normal ghost stories. Like, there’ll be a ghost causing traffic accidents, or the storyteller’s girlfriend will be possessed by a floating head, or their friend will be pulled underwater by a black shadow at the beach.

Then, just as the storyteller finds themselves in peril, their coworker, “T-san,” will get up and shout, “Hah!” He fires a bead of light from his hands and blasts the ghost, or incinerates the floating head, or whatever. The spooks are defeated in an instant. T-san makes his dashing departure, and the narrator is left saying, “Damn, the Templeborn is cool.” The end.

That explanation made Toriko cock her head to the side.

“Is that net lore? It’s not scary at all, right?”

“Not all net lore has to be scary... Well, it’s just a joke. It starts as a ghost story, and then makes you laugh with the punchline. There are a lot of variations on it because it’s so easy to rework. You can end pretty much any

ghost story with T-san showing up and going ‘Hah!’ and people will laugh.”

“I thought you hated that kind of stuff, Sorawo?”

“Yeah.”

I used to think a lot about how “true” ghost stories were. I was harsh on minor inconsistencies that made them seem fabricated, and downright indignant when people used them for jokes. Even I have to admit I was a total pain in the neck, but I couldn’t help myself.

“So this T-san was there? In your seminar?” Kozakura asked and I nodded.

“Probably. I even remember him introducing himself as being born in a temple.”

“Huh? That’s all?”

“Kozakura-san, have you ever had anyone introduce themselves by saying they were born in a temple? I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that comes up under normal circumstances,” I told a skeptical Kozakura. “I don’t remember anything else, but that one thing stuck in my mind. I met him again during my seminar today, but there’s something weird about that too. If I try to remember what we talked about, I get a little fuzzy-headed, and though I can just barely remember his face, I don’t recall his name...”

“But you don’t remember people’s names most of the time, do you?”

“Urgh... Okay, yes, that’s true.”

“You’re not interested in other people to begin with, Sorawo-chan.”

“That’s true too, but...”

“I can remember them!” Toriko piped in.

“Oh, yeah? Well, I guess you’re in charge of that from now on, then, Toriko.”

“You shouldn’t be outsourcing that,” Kozakura said with a sigh as she leaned back in her chair. “Okay, even if we assume this guy really is T-san the Templeborn... What does he do? He’s originally a being that wrecks ghost stories, right? Wouldn’t that make the basis for his actions fundamentally opposed to the monsters in the Otherside?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I agreed.

In our encounters with the Otherside before now, almost without exception, they had tried various methods of terrifying us. I don’t know how intentional that was, but...uh, actually, I don’t even know if they had intentions to begin with. Still, T-san seemed out of place. He wasn’t scary in the least, for one thing.

“May I say one thing? I apologize if I am off base here, but...” Migiwa began with a long preamble, then continued. “Is there any possibility that this T-san is opposed to other entities on the Otherside? If the net lore that he is based on is one that destroys ghost stories, then perhaps T-san is acting in line with the original text?”

“You’re suggesting Otherworld entities might be hostile to one another? Hmm, I guess you could look at it that way. But I dunno...” I said.

“If that’s the case, it’s possible that your amnesia might have been caused by something other than T-san, Sorawo-chan,” Kozakura said.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe T-san went ‘Hah!’ and saved you from something from the other world that was attacking you.”

“If that did happen, it would mean my memories didn’t come back even after he helped me.”

“Well... T-san’s not omnipotent, right?”

“He’s not just not omnipotent, he’s totally useless!” Toriko interjected. “She was blind, and had lost her memories, including of me...”

When I heard the indignation in Toriko’s voice, I thought, *Oh, so that’s why you hit me*. She was like, *How dare you forget me. I’ll never forgive you*. Or something like that... In that case, it was somewhat understandable. If I’d been in her position, I’d have been mad too.

“Perhaps...we could also consider the possibility that the T-san that Kamikoshi-san encountered is not an Otherside entity, but a Fourth Kind.”

I was caught off guard by Migiwa’s suggestion. “That never occurred to me... It’s true there have been Fourth Kinds who followed the text of existing ghost

stories, like the jumping man at the Farm. Maybe it's possible a Fourth Kind could have become the Templeborn."

"Become the Templeborn... Uh, what? What would that mean?" Kozakura asked.

"Like, he gained exorcism powers, or something like that..."

Kozakura scowled and cut me off there. "No, this is making me kind of uncomfortable. I don't think that any further speculation based on your vague memories is going to be helpful."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But that one memory of having met T-san the Templeborn is very clear. So..."

"In that case, we'll need to find out who he is for sure."

"You're being awfully proactive this time, Kozakura-san. That's unusual," I said.

"Huh? If we don't sort this out, you'll fall behind on your studies, and your health will be up in the air too, right? Don't act like this is none of my problem!"

"I-I'm sorry." I ducked my head as she shouted at me with a serious look on her face. "Well, then... Should I look into him?"

"How?"

"We're in the same seminar. I'm sure there'll be opportunities for us to meet."

"Sorawo, I'll go with—" Toriko started to say, but I shook my head.

"I can do this on my own. I mean, you must be busy with your own studies, Toriko. Your third year just started."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"It's okay. I'll be careful. And I won't hesitate to call you on days you're free."

"Okay..."

Kozakura, who had been watching that exchange between Toriko and me, took a deep breath and stood up. "Well, time to head home. C'mon, Sorawo-chan, make sure you say your thanks. Can you do that?"

“Yes, I can do that!” I replied indignantly. “Um, Migiwa-san, I’m really sorry to have troubled you like this.”

“Oh, think nothing of it. If you need some extra hands, please contact us at once.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little as I imagined Migiwa—who looked like anything but a law-abiding citizen—and the beefy Torchlight contractors lurking around campus.

“Ah ha ha... I appreciate the thought, at least. Thank you.”

I stood up and was getting ready to leave when it happened. I put away the gun that had been returned to me, shouldered my bag, and looked up to see a pair of black eyes staring at me. I stopped dead in my tracks. A child’s head had sprouted from behind the sofa that Kozakura was sitting on. When she noticed my line of sight, Kozakura turned to look. She screamed and jumped out of her seat, skillfully bounding over the low table between us as she evacuated to where Toriko and I were in an instant.

“Huh? Oh, hey, it’s the girl from before.”

Apparently Toriko hadn’t noticed her before now either. The girl we had brought back from beyond Hasshaku-sama’s gate had been standing behind the sofa for who knows how long.

“O-Oh, that kid...” Kozakura said between heaving breaths. She shook her head vigorously.

The girl kept peering over the sofa at us without a word. She was wearing a set of light pink pajamas.

“She’s still at DS Research?” I asked, and Migiwa seemed concerned.

“So far, we have been unable to ascertain her identity. We are looking all over, though.”

“Is it okay to let her walk around like that?”

“Even if we lock the door, she always slips out at some point...”

“Huh...? Isn’t that bad? You’ve gotta lock her up proper—Oof!”

A powerful blow from Kozakura's elbow cut me off and I doubled over in pain.

"Wh-What was that for?!"

"She's in the room, okay? Watch your mouth."

"I was just thinking it's dangerous to let a kid roam around here."

"So we don't even know her name, huh?" Toriko asked. "What do you call her? She must have some sort of temporary name, right?"

Migiwa shook his head. "None in particular."

"No way," Toriko said.

"Because she has never shown any indication that she understands what we say to her."

"Does she get violent? It wasn't easy getting her into the bath at my place..." Kozakura said.

When we brought the kid back to the surface world, she was filthy. The black dress she'd worn was practically a rag too, so we'd taken her to the bath in Kozakura's house, and the three of us worked together to wash her from head to toe. She resisted, of course. Eventually, she ran out of energy, but it had been exhausting for the three of us too.

"Fortunately, she is not that rebellious now. We provide her food and a place to sleep, which has gradually eased her wariness of us. It took some work to get her toilet-trained. I put her excrement in the toilet bowl, and taught her with gestures, so now she uses the toilet on her own three times out of five."

"Wait, you're the one teaching her that, Migiwa-san?" I asked.

"It worked out that way... I leave more delicate matters to the nurse, of course."

Toriko crouched down, meeting the little girl at eye level. "Hey, little girl, could you tell us your name?"

The girl looked back at Toriko with no expression. Toriko tried asking again.

"Do you understand? I am Toriko. Next to me is Kozakura. This is Sorawo. Over there is Migiwa."

She pointed to each of us, carefully enunciating our names. Then, she pointed to the girl.

“Who are you?”

“I’m not Michiko.”

We were all shocked when she suddenly spoke after being silent for so long.

“What did she just...” Migiwa blurted out, surprised. The girl turned to him and said it again.

“I’m not Michiko. Take a closer look, old man.”

Then her lips drew taut again, and she looked up at me.

“Well, I guess we’ve established she’s not Michiko...” Kozakura murmured, bewildered. “You sure she doesn’t understand us?”

“No, that was...” I said, looking at Toriko as I did. She nodded back at me. “...something I said a long time ago. When we met Abarato.”

“This girl...she seems to know our past conversations, and she repeats them,” Toriko explained.

“Huh...?” Kozakura said.

“It was like that when we first found her too. She repeated a conversation between me, Toriko, and you—”

“Huh?! Why am I getting roped into this?!”

“Don’t ask me.”

Toriko turned to look back at me and Kozakura arguing. “Hey, don’t you feel bad for her, not having a name?”

“We’ll find out who she is eventually,” I said, but Toriko gave me a dubious look.

“You sure about that, Sorawo? We found her on the Otherside. I’m thinking she might not be an ordinary girl.”

“If she’s not an ordinary girl, then what is she?”

“I dunno...”

I'd given some thought to where the girl might have come from.

"She's not Abarato's daughter. We know that much, at least."

"Yeah, he didn't seem like he had a kid," Toriko agreed.

"We looked into it, and the Abaratos had no children. It was just the two of them," Migiwa added.

"And the wife...?" I asked.

"Missing. We could find nothing about the individual the two of you met."

"I knew it..."

I thought back to our conversation with "Michiko Abarato" in the café. At this point, her face was a blurry memory. I wasn't even confident the meeting had happened at all.

"This is gonna sound super weird, but...could Abarato have changed into her, or something like that...?" I said hesitantly, but Toriko shook her head.

"I don't think so. I mean, they have nothing in common."

"Well, yeah, I know that, but..."

Having seen the dramatic changes that contact with the Otherside could have on a human body as many times as I had...I couldn't discard the possibility that, just maybe, that was what had happened.

Surprisingly, Kozakura nodded as if she understood. "Honestly, I thought something similar."

"Huh? You too, Kozakura-san?"

"Yeah... To be honest, when you two first brought her back, I thought she was a shrunken Satsuki for a moment."

Toriko inhaled sharply, and looked away. It was like she felt guilty about something.

"Hmm..." I replied, looking at the back of Toriko's head.

"That's impossible, though," Kozakura added apologetically. "Their faces don't look all that similar."

“Oh, I see. Not that I’d know anything about that.”

There was an awkward silence. I had an idea of my own, but I didn’t share it with them.

In that place with the massive setting sun, when we chased the girl inside the mound of trash, I felt like I was chasing a younger version of myself. It might be because my doppelgänger ordered me to go after her, or at least I got the impression it did, but I saw myself in the way the girl was desperately running away.

I wasn’t a little girl when I was running away from my brainwashed relatives and the cult they’d fallen in with, it was actually a period of a few years when I was in middle and high school, but I might have projected the helplessness I felt then onto the fleeing child. Once I realized that, it was too embarrassing to tell anyone.

“So, what are we gonna do about her name?” Toriko broke the silence. Oh, yeah, that was what we were talking about, huh?

“I’ll give her one,” I said, and Toriko and Kozakura both looked at me with surprise.

“You, Sorawo-chan?”

“That’s unusual.”

“You don’t mind, right?”

“It’s fine by me.”

I didn’t want to let Toriko and Kozakura, who were still hung up on Satsuki Uruma, be the ones to name her. I’d had a similar thought before when I grew my hair out. Maybe these two just had a weakness for long, black hair. I doubted it, but I couldn’t completely discard my suspicion.

“Did you come up with a name?” Toriko asked.

“Hmm. If she says she’s not Michiko, let’s call her ‘Not Michiko,’” I said casually, without much thought. They both gave me a pretty harsh look, and I flinched. The joke wasn’t that funny, apparently.

“Just kidding. I’ll come up with a proper name.”

“You’d better,” Kozakura said insistently.

When I looked back at the little girl, she scrunched her face up as if my eyes were blinding her. Then, turning her head to look away, she tottered off.

“Time to head home, I guess...” Kozakura said listlessly, and Toriko stood up.

“Well, we’ll be off now. Thank you again for—” I tried to say my goodbyes, but Migiwa suddenly seemed to remember something.

“Ah! Come to think of it, there was one more thing I’ve been forgetting.”

Interrupted again. I just couldn’t seem to leave, huh?

“Since we have both of you here... Runa Urumi has regained consciousness. Did you want to see her?” Migiwa asked.

I turned to Toriko. I had already seen Runa Urumi the last time I came.

“We don’t have any reason to, right?” I suggested.

Toriko thought about it for a moment before looking up.

“I’d like to see her.”

“Huh? Seriously?”

“I want to know how she feels now.”

It was the same reason I had decided to meet Runa Urumi last time.

5

We followed Migiwa as he led us to the ward for Fourth Kind contactees. Each side of the hallway was lined with rooms that were somewhere between hospital rooms and prison cells. There was a large window for each room, and they had a system somewhere to control their transparency. Most were clouded at the moment, and it looked like a heavy mist hung in the room beyond the glass. Occasionally, a shadow would move in the thick, white fog; it was like walking through an aquarium where every tank was filled with smoke. Runa Urumi’s room was at the end of that long hallway.

Had she noticed our approach? Runa Urumi stood on the other side of the

large window, waiting. She wore a light green patient gown that resembled a yukata. The marks left on her cheeks, drawn taut by the stitches, looked like an exaggerated smile.

Runa narrowed her eyes as she looked at us. Her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear her voice. From what Migiwa had told me, they had a Fourth Kind patient in the past who let out horrible screams, so the room had been completely soundproofed. Only a deaf nurse was allowed inside.

Runa seemed well aware that we couldn't hear her, because she picked a tablet off the desk and began writing on the screen with a stylus.

"I'm tired of watching Netflix. This is boring."

"Picky, aren't we?" Kozakura muttered in exasperation.

"Just let me go online."

"You know that's not happening."

"You'd just have to disable my mic. Please."

The only things in the room were a simple desk, a bed, and cases full of clothes underneath it. There were some books and notepads on top of the desk, along with a container with no lid, full of stationery and other small items. Maybe because her face had healed, the medical equipment had been taken away, and it was less of a sickroom than a cell for solitary confinement. Yeah, it did seem like she might die of boredom in there.

If I looked at this from an objective viewpoint, DS Research was detaining a minor with no legal basis. That said, knowing everything she'd done, I wasn't feeling overly sympathetic.

Even if you only counted the people she'd directly brainwashed with her Voice, there were still dozens of victims. She'd made them cast aside their friends, families, and workplaces to follow her orders and engage in illegal activities. How many relationships had she destroyed, and, by extension, how many people had she made miserable? Hundreds? Maybe over a thousand? Although we'd rescued her on an impulse, it might have been better to let her die there.

But we went and saved her...

“Can she hear us out here?” Kozakura looked up at Migiwa and asked. Migiwa checked a panel near the window before answering.

“It is off at the moment, but I can turn on the microphone so you can speak to her.”

“Turn on the mic,” Toriko said. Migiwa nodded, then touched the panel.

The speakers in the room must have made a noise. Runa’s gaze went to the ceiling.

Toriko stepped forward, standing facing Runa on the other side of the glass. Runa looked back to the window.

“How do you feel about Satsuki?” Toriko asked without any lead in. Runa cocked her head to the side.

“Huh?”

“You worshipped her, right? But after what she did to you—”

“You mean this?”

Runa traced the scars on her cheeks, smiling.



“Did you think these bothered Runa?”

“They don’t? They’re pretty bad scars.”

“Not at all. These are holy stigmata that Satsuki-sama herself marked me with, you know.”

Yep, she’s a total nutter, and, she’ll write out the words that matter to her even if they’re complicated, huh, were my two impressions.

Then, with exaggerated upturned eyes, she showed Toriko the tablet.

“You were concerned for me?”

“You thought Runa would be shocked if anything happened to her adorable face?”

“...”

“The things you sympathize with tell a lot about you, you know?”

“You wouldn’t want to scar your own face, Nishina-san. It’s pretty. I understand.”

“But aren’t you really jealous? That Satsuki-sama herself touched me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to have a face like mine, Nishina-san?”

“I’m sure it would suit you.”

She was as cheeky as ever. Even though it was Toriko she was trying to rile up, I was the one getting mad.

If they were going to let her use the internet, they’d better not just not let her record—they needed to prevent her from posting too.

“You really feel that way? After watching your own mother die?” Toriko asked, her tone inscrutable.

Runa looked down to start writing again.

The hand holding the stylus ran back and forth across the screen. We couldn’t see what she was writing from here. It was taking her a while, so I expected a lengthy response, but her gestures seemed a little rough for that. Large movements that it was hard to imagine were for writing anything, like she was

just running the stylus back and forth...

Finally, Runa looked up. The text on the tablet was surprisingly simple.

"This is frustrating. Why don't you come in here?"

She'd erased whatever it was she wrote and rewrote that instead. Before Toriko could respond, she wrote her next message.

"Let's talk directly. It will be faster."

"There's no way she's going in there," I interjected from behind Toriko, and Runa finally looked at me.

"Oh, right, Kamikoshi-san's here too. That won't work, then."

That won't work, then? I glared at Runa. *What had she been planning to do if Toriko entered the room?*

Runa's eyes sparkled with delight.

"You got mad at me."

"You're so lovely when you're angry, Kamikoshi-san."

What's her problem...?

"I really do want us to be friends."

Well, I sure don't. Maybe I should give her a good long look with my right eye...

Er, no... No, I shouldn't.

I put that dangerous thought out of my head. If I started doing things like that, I'd be as bad as she was.

"Oh, but maybe it's okay if you're together?"

"My voice can't affect two people at the same time, right?"

When we didn't respond, Runa started writing another message impatiently.

"What's the harm? I'm starving for conversation. Come on in."

"How about you, Kozakura-san? It's been a while. Wouldn't you like to hear my voice again?"

“Who would...?” Kozakura muttered, shaking her head.

“If you’re still worried, I’ll wear this.”

Runa pulled a black face mask out of the container on top of her desk. It wasn’t an ordinary mask, but a thick one made of leather or rubber, and instead of strings it was strapped on with belts and metal fasteners. It had a large U-shaped mouthpiece in it. I’d never seen anything like it before, but I could imagine what it was used for. It was a gag to keep her from speaking. They probably made her wear it when someone other than the deaf nurse needed to enter her room.

“If I can’t say anything, it’s fine, right?”

“You two can just say whatever you want in front of Runa.”

“I think we’re done here...don’t you, Toriko?” I asked, and Toriko let out a small sigh.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Migiwa reached for the panel and cut the mic.

We turned around, and headed back down the hall. When I turned to look back one last time, Runa was pressed against the glass watching us go. Because of the scars on her face, it looked like she was smirking.

6

“Leave it to me! I’d do anything for you, Senpai!”

The day after we came back from DS Research, I went to Akari to ask for a little help with something, and I got the same response, word for word, that I had expected. It felt like déjà vu or something.

“I-I was hoping you’d say that.”

“And I did! What can I help you with?”

“Well, calm down. I’ll tell you...”

I stopped Akari as she was leaning into this way too hard. Literally. We were in the university cafeteria, at a shady seat in the back. I’d chosen this spot in the

interest of not being overheard by others, but if Akari was going to keep raising her voice like that it defeated the purpose. Come to think of it, there was a karaoke place near the university, and any number of other places we could have had this conversation. What was I thinking?

On the table in front of us, we'd ordered the cake set with drinks. Black tea with apple pie for me, and coffee with no-bake cheesecake for Akari. This might be the first time I was getting together like this with someone other than Toriko. When I realized that, it made me feel kind of restless.

"Sorry about before. I'd lost my memory."

"I knew that was it. Did you get a concussion or something?"

"Uh, yeah, probably something like that."

"And is your eye still...?" Akari asked, trailing off, as she looked at the eye patch over my right eye.

"A little, yeah. But it's okay. It's getting better."

"Don't strain yourself, okay? I've had a concussion before... If it affected your vision, you must've really gotten hit good, huh, Senpai?"

"Yeah. I even got a proper brain scan done. They say there's nothing wrong with me."

"Thank goodness."

The total relief on Akari's face made me feel guilty, even if I wasn't lying to her because I wanted to.

I was keeping the eye patch on because I couldn't predict how T-san was going to react. What would he do when he found out that my right eye had recovered? Was T-san a Fourth Kind contactee, or a "phenomenon" from the Otherside that had appeared in a form that mimicked net lore? Whichever he was, I probably had to be careful about how I made contact with him. I wanted to pretend I still had amnesia like at the previous seminar, and act like I hadn't noticed anything for now.

I had already ruled out the possibility that he was just an unrelated third party who happened to have been born at a temple. It was impossible for anything

involving us and the Otherside to happen by sheer coincidence.

Probably...

When I thought about it, doubt began to creep in. Or suspicion, rather. When you dig through true ghost stories, there's no shortage of unbelievable synchronicity. Coincidences that seem to make no sense happen, and then end without ever making any sense. Things that are pure chance if you ignore them, but seem like ominous signs that you can read anything into once you let them bother you...

Well, if it was a coincidence, that was fine. If it was, I could think about the cause of my loss of memory and vision as a separate issue from T-san.

"This is going to be kind of a weird request, but there's a guy at the university I want you to dig into," I said, focusing back on the matter at hand.

"What kind of guy?"

"A third-year in the same seminar as me. He's, uh, tall, and has short hair."

As I was giving her an explanation that seemed vague even to me, Akari got impatient. "What's his name?"

"Dunno."

"Huh? Even though he's in the same seminar?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I don't know his name, but I'll point him out for you."

"Um, I can ask my friends about him, if you want."

"No, I don't want you to talk to anyone about this."

When I said that, Akari's eyes lit up. "It's a secret, huh! Gotcha."

For all that she tended to stick her head in others' business, the girl was tight-lipped, which really helped.

She is tight-lipped, right...?

The conversation with Michiko Abarato flitted through my mind, and I suddenly felt uneasy.

"What's wrong? You've got this weird look on your face all of a sudden."

"I just wanted to be sure, but have you ever referred someone to me, saying I could help them find a missing person?"

Akari got a troubled look on her face and shook her head. "What's that about?"

"Nah, sounds like it doesn't have anything to do with you. Forget about it."

"If this is a secret, that's fine, but... The guy I'm looking into. What did he do?"

"Dunno."

"Huh?"

"That's something I want to find out. He seems like he should know about what happened when I lost my memory."

"Is there some reason you can't ask him yourself?"

"I wanted to figure out if it seemed safe to ask him directly first."

Akari fell silent for a moment. "So, does that mean...that guy got violent with you, Senpai?"

"Huh?"

I was dumbstruck when Akari suddenly lowered her voice. But, no...it made sense. I'd mentioned a concussion, so of course she'd link the two things together.

"No, no. That's not how it is. Calm down."

"Well, okay. But, um, you just say the word, and I'll take him down," Akari said, sounding worried. Her eyes were focused.

"Scary."

Oops! I said that out loud.

"Oh, sorry. But, um, I'm serious, okay?"

"No, you're scaring me here. I don't want you getting arrested for assault on my behalf."

"If I do, I'll make sure it doesn't cause trouble for you."

"Stop it."

“Okay.”

I felt uneasy as I looked at Akari. Was her personality always like this? Or was it my fault...?

“Is something wrong?”

“Akari...why have you gotten so attached to me, anyway?” I asked, but my wording must have been strange, because she looked at me like I’d said something funny.

“Am I attached?”

Maybe it would have been better to say she idolized me, but I was way too embarrassed to say that myself.

“It may be weird for me to be the one saying this, but I’m pretty cold and unfriendly, aren’t I?”

“Well, yeah... Wait, you were aware of it?” Akari asked.

“I know I’m not easy to get along with, and I expected you to start distancing yourself from me, but you never change. I mean, even considering your interest in what I do, you just never seem to give up... Why is that?”

“Err, I never thought you’d ask, so this is kind of embarrassing. But, hmm, let me think about it.”

Her eyes wandered for a while before she looked back at me. “You’re cool, Kamikoshi-senpai.”

“Huh?”

I never expected that answer.

“You don’t try to make people like you. But you’re strong-willed, with your eyes set on something far away. When I was a kid, I tended to idolize people who didn’t even notice me, you know?”

“Oh, I see...” I said.

Natsumi’d cry if she heard that, I thought, but only gave a vague response. That delinquent probably only has eyes for Akari, though...

“Even after I got wasted and started dancing naked at the love hotel...?”

“That was cool too!”

Liar!

My doubt must have shown on my face. Akari tried to cover for herself and spare my feelings.

“I-It’s true! You had this, uh, intense mystique thing going on... Nattsun was shocked too. She’s been saying that you’re ‘something else’ ever since.”

No, that’s ‘cause she was weirded out...

“Well, whatever. I get it now. Anyway, back to the topic at hand—that guy. He knows my face, so I want you to look into him on my behalf, see what he does.”

Akari’s face lit up. “Gotcha! Like a detective! Now I’m getting excited.”

“You don’t need to do anything dangerous, okay? I mean it. Just tail him, and see what kind of person he is for me.”

More precisely, I didn’t want to know what *kind* of person he was, but whether he was a person at all. Akari’s unbiased eyes might spot unusual behavior better than mine. Kozakura was right. I was fundamentally uninterested in other people...

But maybe I ought to take a little more interest in the ones around me who are involved in my life. The ones who choose to involve themselves with me.

That’s what I was thinking as I saw Akari get all excited about playing gumshoe.

When Akari misunderstood the situation and thought someone had hurt me, she was genuinely upset on my behalf. She got angrier than I thought she would.

How would I have felt if our positions were reversed? If I found out someone had hit Akari. Would I get upset? I’d like to think so, but I also know just how heartless of a person I am. But still, I wish I could get just as genuinely angry for Akari’s sake.

The day of my next seminar came the following week. I wasn't late this time, obviously, but when I got to the seminar room, the Templeborn guy was already there.

He was just as I remembered him. Around 180 centimeters tall, with close-cropped black hair and narrow eyes. He looked at me when I came in, which made my heart jump a little, but he didn't really react to me. I feigned indifference too, and took a seat that was across from him diagonally.

The seminar started on time. Two or three students who had been selected last week each gave a presentation on their themes, and the teacher provided critique and commentary as we all discussed.

"Thank you, Doita-kun. Please be seated. Now, listen, I see you developing a bad habit. You quoted Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Lacan, Judith Butler, and a number of other famous philosophers, but was that really necessary to argue your point? I'm not saying you shouldn't bring philosophy into anthropology, of course. It's just that piling up quotes from our predecessors is just a rhetorical trick to try and make yourself sound more authoritative, and any clear-thinking person will see right through it. It's true that there are a lot of researchers who like to write in this style, but please correct the habit while you're still a student. You'll find yourself trapped in narrow circles of people who write the same way, and there's no recovering from that."

As I listened to the first guy who presented get torn apart by Professor Abekawa, I glanced furtively through my bangs at Templeborn-kun. He was sitting there normally, looking down at the summary on his desk and not doing anything particularly suspicious. I wanted to just use my right eye and confirm his true identity, but I was hesitant to do it here in the surface world, especially when there were so many uninvolved people around. I had to consider what might happen if things went wrong. Based on past experience, he might snap and start punching the people next to him.

A year ago, that thought probably wouldn't have fazed me. *Hmm, so this is what having a conscience is like. I sure have grown...*

"Your theme is 'Games as a means of communication,' right, Doita-kun? I touched on this last time, but how do you play games and how do you use them

to communicate? If you have that firm foothold to work from, I don't think you'll need to rely on quoting others quite like this. I think the way you've defined games for yourself is rather narrow. When I was young, the word 'game' tended to be associated with gambling. I don't know how things are now, but you haven't really thought about expanding things in that way, right? While you do want to limit your topic, it's also important to have an overall view of how it fits into the subject as a whole, so—"

While I was listening to the professor, it vaguely occurred to me that games weren't something I played so much as watched. When I was staying in internet cafés to avoid going home, I often watched videos of games on Niconico Douga or YouTube—like of *Minecraft* builds, or people who were good at *Dark Souls*. There were a lot of games I became weirdly knowledgeable about despite never having played them myself. I often thought about how, if I ever got my own place, I wanted to buy a game console and play some games, but it occurred to me now that I never did. Ever since I'd discovered the Otherside, I'd had way too much other stuff to do.

The comment and critique ended, and we moved on to discussion. As everyone was saying this or that, I was watching Templeborn-kun to see if he would say anything, but then the professor suddenly called my name, and I flinched.

"Do you have something to add, Kamikoshi-san? You looked like you were deep in thought."

"Huh? Uh, yes?! Oh! Erm, uh..." I trailed a bunch of meaningless sounds as I desperately tried to recall the conversation I had been half-ignoring.

"Ah, yes. I was thinking that since there are those people who like to quote, uh...philosophers, was it? Maybe the culture of those people would be interesting to study through participant observation...?"

Maybe...?

I gradually lost confidence as I kept speaking, and by the end I trailed off mumbling, but it seemed to go over well with the other students, and there was a bit of laughter.

"I bet they'd *hate* that!" the transfer student sitting on my right said

cheerfully.

Was that narrowing in Professor Abekawa's eyes a smile?

"Taking researchers as the subject of an ethnography is an interesting idea. It would take some skill to execute on it, however. You would need to be familiar with the content of each of your subjects research, and its position within their broader field. On the other hand, some might suggest that sort of thing is only possible while you are still a student. It might be good practice to imagine how you would investigate."

I don't know if I was being praised or he was exasperated with me, but at least I'd managed to avoid freezing up and not being able to answer. As I was sweating a little and letting out a sigh of relief, the professor moved on to the next person.

"—kun, how about you? Do you have anything to add?"

I realized a moment too late. It was the Templeborn guy! Damn, I'd missed his name again.

What is he going to say? I waited with bated breath for him to open his mouth.

"Ah, well... But since she, who had been acting as if nothing happened got so heated, I also told my side of the story. But the beach was very busy, and it was easy to fish. However, I heard on the way home that a man with a saw had been standing in my room, so I think Doita-kun should do that too. There's nothing that isn't communication, after all."

"I see. Thank you. That might be a reasonable assertion," the professor replied, and there were scattered nods in the seminar room. Doita-kun, in particular, seemed relieved that someone was defending him after he'd been torn to shreds during the critique.

I was kind of disappointed. Like... Oh, he just says totally normal stuff, huh?

Maybe that was why I didn't remember a word of what he'd said last time. If he only said ordinary things, there was no way it would stick in my memory.

Templeborn-kun turned towards me, so I hurriedly looked away.

I kept carefully watching him after that, but nothing unusual happened.

A few minutes before class ended, my phone vibrated. I checked it under the desk, and it was Akari. She was contacting me to let me know she was in position outside the seminar room, just like we'd planned.

The professor looked at the clock and began wrapping things up. "I think I will ask Benimori-kun, Cai-kun, and Kamikoshi-kun to present next time."

Uh-oh... My turn's coming up already. Next week, huh?

"I look forward to seeing all of you again next week. Take care."

We all rose from our seats, and filed out of the seminar room. I was the last to leave, calling Akari on my phone as I did.

"Hey, Akari, where are you?"

"Over here, Senpai."

It was hard to tell where "over here" was when her voice was coming out of my phone, but I found her soon enough. She was standing at the door to the stairs, phone pressed to her ear, looking straight at me. The way she was acting, she seemed like she might well start waving to me, so I put a stop to that.

"If you look at me so much he'll catch on!"

"Oh! Sorry!"

I glanced at Templeborn-kun as he walked down the hallway. Fortunately, he didn't seem to have noticed anything was up.

"You see him? The tall guy who just walked past you and headed downstairs."

"With the short hair?"

"That's the one."

"Gotcha. Leave it to me." Akari nodded to me and headed down the stairs.

"I'll follow a little behind you, so tell me where you're headed, okay?"

"Roger that."

I waited a little while, and once the hallway had emptied out, I went down the stairs, headed outside, and looked left and right beneath the cloudy sky. There

was no sign of Templeborn-kun or Akari.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Heading towards the co-op.”

“Got it. I’ll head over there.”

I hurried over towards the co-op. I didn’t want Templeborn-kun to catch on, but I was scared of what might happen if I couldn’t rush over to them in the event something happened.

“Is it okay for us to talk the whole time like this?” Akari asked.

“It’s fine. There’s lots of people around.”

As I wandered around the campus, talking on the phone the whole time, I recalled that I had done the same thing with Toriko not so long ago. Hopefully nothing weird would happen this time.

“Well? Is he acting suspiciously?” I asked.

“Not really. What counts as suspicious?”

“Huh? Uh, stuff people don’t usually do... Y’know, like mumbling to himself, staring at nothing, going into places he’s not allowed to enter...”

“...”

Akari fell silent. It felt like she wanted to say something, so I asked, “What is it?”

“No, um, forget about it.”

“Huh? What?”

“It’d make you mad...”

“What are you talking about? I won’t get mad.”

“Really? Well, it’s just, uh, all that stuff you just said, it kinda describes how you normally act...”

“...”

“You mad...?”

“I won’t get mad.”

“I knew it. You’re mad.”

The plaza in front of the co-op was full of people, as always. I moved into a shadowy corner near the ATM booth and continued my call with Akari.

“He went into the cafeteria. What do you think he’ll eat?”

“What are you doing, Akari?”

“Hanging out by the entrance and acting inconspicuous.” Then, as if reminiscing, Akari added, “This was where I talked to you for the first time, huh, Senpai?”

“It is, yeah, now that you mention it.”

Remembering what happened back then, I looked around the plaza. There were a number of cats hanging around now too, but none of them seemed interested in me.

“You came to me on someone’s suggestion, right? I think they’d told you I could sense spirits, or something like that.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. I don’t remember too well.”

“Who told you? Were there rumors about me?”

In the time since I’d come to the university, I only remembered talking about my interest in true ghost stories and net lore during orientation and at the welcome party for first-years that I tagged along to without really knowing why. I apparently brought it up in that first seminar that I no longer remember too, but not at any other point before then. That was because I had been overenthusiastic in the beginning, and that weirded people out and put them off from interacting with me. It wasn’t a good experience. Had I been so cringe-inducing that rumors spread? That would be frustrating, but honestly, at this point, I wouldn’t really blame people. It hurt thinking back on the lack of self-awareness I had when I first came here. If Akari had forgotten, maybe that was actually for the best.

“Hmm, I wonder. I think that’s how it happened. We don’t have anything else in common, after all.”

“True that...”

I was in the School of Arts and Sciences, while Akari was in the School of Education. Not only were we not in the same year, we didn’t even frequent the same buildings. Maybe she’d learned about me from someone in a circle she was in?

“Akari, are you in any circles?”

“Oh, I’m in CookSoc.”

“Uh, what now?”

“The Cooking Research Society.”

Come to think of it, she was cooking when she invited me to her place. No wonder she was so good at it.

“Wouldn’t have called that one. I figured you’d be in the karate club.”

“I only learn karate at the dojo I’ve been going to since forever, so—huh?”

On the other end of the phone, Akari warily lowered her voice.

“Senpai, that guy might be a little weird. He came to the cafeteria, but he’s just walking around in circles. It doesn’t look like he’s planning to eat anything.”

“It’s not so crowded there’s no seats, right?”

“Right. I don’t think he bought any meal tickets... Oh, he’s heading outside.”

“Is he headed this way?”

“Where are you, Senpai?”

“Next to the ATM.”

“He’s headed your way! Hide!”

I instinctively dove into the ATM booth. It hit me that I had no idea what I was going to do if Templeborn-kun was coming to pull out money, but it was too late now.

I looked at the mirror on the ATM that was designed to let you see behind you. I saw a familiar figure pass in front of the booth. An aloof male student of middling height and weight with a shaved head. He looked just how you’d

expect the heir to a temple to look.

Templeborn-kun disappeared out of the mirror without so much as looking in my direction. Then, a little later, Akari hurried after him.

“He didn’t spot you?” she asked.

“I think I was fine.”

“The guy sure is fast,” Akari said, a little winded.

“Where’s he heading?”

“He’s cutting across the plaza next to the co-op, so it looks like the back gate.”

I stepped out of the booth and gave chase too.

“I was right. He headed off campus.”

“Think he’s heading home?”

“Mind if I keep tailing him?”

“It’d help, but are you okay, Akari? Any plans after this...?”

“Not until next period, so I’m good!”

I indirectly tailed them while listening to Akari’s running commentary. Templeborn-kun headed into the residential area west of the university. Akari reported every time they turned a corner, but following her verbal directions as I walked was hard.

“The corner with the house with solar panels on the roof!”

“There’s one on each side of the road. Which is it?”

“Oh! He went across the bridge!”

“Bridge? Where is there a... Oh! This bridge? It’s practically a drainage ditch.”

“He’s going past the empty lot.”

“Isn’t this a farmer’s field?”

Akari never responded with further explanation, so we both continued our confused pursuit. I gradually lost track of where Akari and I were.

“We’re in this wide open place. I never knew there was somewhere like this

close to the university.”

“What’s it like?”

As I asked that, it occurred to me that this might have been easier if I’d been looking at Google Maps the whole time.

“It’s a field...with a single white house.”

“Is there anywhere to hide? Won’t he spot you?”

“There’s a window on the second floor of the white house... Seems like someone’s there. They’re looking this way...”



Her voice grew a little more distant, like she'd moved the phone away from her face.

"Akari?"

"There's something tall on the other side of the house... What is it? A transmission tower of some sort? But it's awfully big, like Tokyo Tower..."

It took a moment for me to realize, but a chill ran down my spine.

That's the house from "Michiko Abarato's" postcard!

"Akari! It's dangerous there! Run away!"

"..."

"Are you listening?! Akari—"

"Hahh..."

Hearing a sigh on the other end of the phone, I froze solid.

It wasn't Akari's. It was a man's voice.

"Good grief..."

"Who...?"

"You came all the way here. There's no helping some people..."

"I asked who you are."

He might not have been able to hear my voice, because the man continued, exasperatedly saying, *"You're possessed by a troublesome thing too. Hold on a second."*

"T-san...?" I asked, and the very next moment...

There was an incredibly loud shout on the other side of the phone.

"Hah!!!"

It felt like I'd been punched. I reeled from the shock, which felt like having a gun fired next to your face. My head pounded. Unable to take the dizziness, I fell to one knee.

"Guh..."

My right eye ached. I tore off the eye patch, slowly blinking. My vision was hazy. I desperately tried to focus, terrified I was going to lose my sight again.

As I was attempting to recover from the shock, my vision returned. I put one hand on the ground, rose to my feet, and pressed my ear to the phone. It had hung up.

I called back immediately. I was running as I listened to it ring.

I could hear another phone receiving the call not far away. When I came around the corner, out of breath, I ran into Akari. There was no field, no nothing. She was just standing around on a normal road in a residential area. It wasn't even a white house in front of her, just a rundown apartment building.

"Akari!" I called out to her, and she dazedly turned in my direction. The phone in her hand was still ringing.

"Akari, you okay?"

"Yes?" Akari looked down at her phone, looking confused as she cut off the call.

"Did something happen? Did T-san do anything to you?"

Akari took another look at me. "Who were you again...?" she asked, sounding suspicious.

"Huh?"

"Do you have the wrong person? Have we ever met before?"

It didn't seem like she was joking.

She's lost her memory!

Akari restlessly looked around the area, as if she'd just come back to her senses.

"Huh...? Where is this? What was I doing here?"

"Hold on, Akari. How far back do you remember?"

"Come again?" Akari looked at me, a little creeped out. "Um, I'm sorry, but I think there's been some misunderstanding here. I'll be leaving now," she said coldly, and tried to walk past me.

I instinctively grabbed her arm. "Hold up."

As she looked down at my hand, a dangerous look crossed Akari's face. "Would you mind letting go of me?"

"I can't."

"Listen, I don't know what you think you're doing, but you had better let go. For your own good," she said, her tone menacing.

Even after losing her memories, she's still prone to violence, huh? I thought, but I was intimidated by the muscles I could feel under the palm of my hand. Unlike Toriko, who had a firm core in the middle of her softness, Akari was...how should I put it...? Hard. The arm I was holding was brawny. If she decided to seriously let loose on me, I was going to get beaten black-and-blue before I had any chance to resist.

But still...

When I glared right back at her, Akari's eyes widened. I'll bet she never expected a weak-looking otaku like me not to be scared of her. Well, that's a little wrong. I was scared silly, but I knew intuitively that if I backed down now, it was going to be a pain to deal with later. If she forgot about me and went back to hanging with her less gloomy friends, the relationship we had would genuinely be severed, and that would be a real pain. No matter what it was that T-san did to her, I needed to handle it now!

Keeping my eyes locked with hers, I focused specifically on my right eye. The image of her in my vision...was unchanged. I'd expected her to be wreathed in silver phosphorescence or have something else abnormal going on.

"Hey, what's your problem?" Akari said coldly. Restless, she shook her head, and brushed her bangs back. "You're annoying. Do you *want* to get clobbered?"

That's not a line a karateka should be saying to an amateur, I thought, then realized something. I was looking at her with my right eye, so she was under the influence of it. If I kept on looking at her, she might really pulverize me.

But even knowing that, I couldn't leave her like this. There had to be a reason she'd lost her memory. What was it Toriko said back then? While she was fishing around in my right eye.

"It's not inside..."

I remember her mumbling that to herself. Right. At first, she must have thought I was possessed by something, like that time with the Yamanoke. I had been thinking the same thing about Akari. But it was wrong. Observing her with my right eye showed none of the other world's influence. If anything, she was actually purer.

"That's not it... Is something missing...?"

Toriko's words came back to me.

Oh...! I might have figured this out.

To summarize, it wasn't that Akari and I had lost our memories due to the influence of the Otherside... Instead, we were purged of that influence, and lost all of the memories and abilities that were attached to it...?

Because he got us with his "Hah!"?

Was that it? If so...

Akari looked like she wasn't going to hide her irritation any longer. She had a glassy look in her eyes, and the trembling of her right hand, hanging at her side, showed that she was just barely restraining the urge to punch me.

Eek...

I felt like I was holding a grenade. Despite my fear that a mass of violence was about to explode right next to me, I was desperate, and kept my right eye focused on Akari. My eye and Toriko's hand could each make contact with the boundary between the surface world and the other world in their own way.

If Toriko's hand was able to bring my memories back, my eye should be able to do the same thing...!

There was no turning back. I was either going to drive Akari just the right amount of crazy to get her memory back, or make her brutally murder me. One of the two.

"Akari," I said, gritting my teeth so I wouldn't look away. "Listen to me, Akari. You know me."

Akari's brow furrowed. Her eyelids trembled.

"You're my kouhai. We met when you approached me. You said the Ninja Cats were after you. I listened to your story, and we went to the cats' town in Ikebukuro, remember?"

There was a change in my right field of vision. A silver haze formed in the center of Akari's body and began to flicker.

"Ninja...Cats...?" Akari shook her head as if she had a headache.

"Remember. All about me. You want to know about the other world, don't you?"

She clenched and unclenched her fists repeatedly. "*Whew*," she exhaled violently. Her face was red like she was drunk. The haze drifted into her head and I saw it settle between her ears.

"It's me. Sorawo Kamikoshi. You always called me Senpai and were really attached to me."

"U-Urgh..."

"I'm looking at you, Akari. When I'm watching you, you get even stronger. Didn't you tell me that?"

"Sen...pai," Akari groaned, lowering her face.

The light in her head gradually brightened. With my eye, I saw it as a translucent sphere the size of a cherry tomato, and the glowing gas appeared to be getting denser. The light thickened inside a sphere with no exit, and it seemed as if it were ready to burst at any moment.

"Your karate was so amazing that time the Ninja Cats attacked. And the way you clobbered Sannukikano with Nattsun too. I'll never forget it."

Akari looked up. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Uh, and then we had the love hotel girls' party...and we all ate honey toast..."

I could almost hear a pop as the sphere burst. It turned inside out, and the light inside scattered all over. At the same time, Akari's lips quivered, and a

word spilled out.

“Senpai!!!” she practically howled, and as she was about to grab me, I thrust my hand out in front of her face.

“Th-That’s far enough!”

Akari stopped. There was a moment’s silence, and then she cocked her head to the side.

“Kamikoshi...-senpai?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Huh? Wha?” Akari seemed confused and took her hands off my shoulders. “Sorry. What am I even doing?”

“Oh... You remember now?”

“Huh? Yes. Uh? Why didn’t I remember you, Senpai?”

“Phew...”

As I felt so relieved and exhausted I could have collapsed on the spot, there was one thing that became firmly set in my mind. Whatever the guy’s true identity was, I could say this for sure: T-san the Templeborn was my enemy.

And there was one more thing.

There was an apartment building I could see behind a confused Akari. It looked uninhabited, like a ruin, but the door at the back of the first floor shone silver in my right eye.

A gate.

We hadn’t put Akari’s memories and my life at risk tailing him for nothing.

We’d found where T-san lived.

8

Migiwa drove past our destination and stopped at the next corner. “Is that it?” he asked, looking in the rearview mirror.

In the back seat, Toriko and I turned around and looked too, staring at the

apartment in question.

“That’s the place,” I said.

“Understood. I will stop the car somewhere nearby and we can come back.”

“Oh, we’ll get out here and stand watch.”

“Be careful.”

Toriko and I stepped out into the street and Migiwa’s Benz drove off. Despite its large frame, the car was able to make the tight turns in these narrow streets as it headed to the coin-operated parking area we’d seen on the way here.

It was two days later on a Saturday afternoon. The spring sun shone down on the residential area giving it a peaceful vibe. Branches from a cherry blossom tree extended out over the road from one yard. The blossoms had all fallen, and there wasn’t a trace of them left. Cherry blossom season comes in April in Akita, so it always felt like it had come too soon and confused me when I first moved here.

“People live in there? Seriously?” Toriko asked, eyeing the apartment dubiously. I didn’t blame her. I lived in a pretty old apartment myself, but this place was absolutely desolate. The wooden planks and cardboard covering up the windows were sun-bleached, and the grass had been allowed to grow wild and free. Then, there were the stairs to the second floor, rusty and full of holes. I wouldn’t have trusted them to hold my weight.

“I don’t know that he ‘lives’ here in the commonly accepted sense of the word, but this is where we tailed T-san back to.”

“You think this is where Akari encountered him?”

“Probably. From what I could hear over the phone, it sounded like she’d wandered into the interstitial space.”

“And then she got Hah!-ed...and that pushed her back to the surface world?”

“Yeah. I think that’s why there was a gate there.”

We approached the apartment, remaining cautious of the possibility that T-san might appear somewhere nearby.

“Was Akari okay after that?”

“I stayed with her a while to keep an eye on her, but she seemed fine. We split up when it came time for her next class, but I gave her a call that night, and she was the same as always.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“But, yeah, it really hits you hard when you see somebody that you know developing amnesia right in front of you. She acted like I was a total stranger when I talked to her, and she was really cold to me. It was like she was a different person. It scared me.”

“I’m glad you can understand now.”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

The reason we had taken the unusual step of bringing Migiwa instead of the two of us coming alone like usual was that if T-san appeared, I wasn’t sure we could take him down on short notice. We couldn’t just pull our guns and start shooting in a residential area, and if he was a Fourth Kind, not an Otherside phenomenon, that would be murder.

Toriko and I had a long chat about whether or not to bring Migiwa. I didn’t want anyone getting involved with the other world who didn’t have to. Toriko agreed. But in this case, it seemed highly likely that our usual strategy of my looking at the monsters and Toriko touching them wasn’t going to cut it. If we got Hah!-ed, then one of us—no, maybe even both of us—might be neutralized.

And if that happened, it would mean we’d forget each other.

“Mama always told me it’s important to rely on other people when you need to.”

That was something Toriko had said while we were talking about it. Of Toriko’s two mothers, “Mama” was the soldier.

“Because if you try to do everything yourself, you may find yourself in a situation where you can only do everything yourself.”

“Sounds deep.”

“I think she was worried about me being unable to make friends.”

“Did you always have problems with that?”

“Yeah, I did.”

*No wonder she fell so hard for Satsuki Uruma when she was nice to her...
Okay, I don't know if she was nice or not. And I don't care.*

While I was thinking about things I didn't have to, we arrived at the apartment. *I'll laugh if we just suddenly run into him now*, I thought, as if it didn't affect me.

“You think T-san noticed Akari tailing him, and deliberately lured her here?” Toriko asked.

“I dunno. If I look at it objectively, it was more like he saved her after she wandered into the interstitial space.”

“You figure?”

“I think anyone would say that.”

“Then you used your right eye to drive her crazy, and return her to normal.”

“I guess so, yeah...”

We looked at one another, not sure what to say.

When I told Toriko about what had happened, I decided not to mention the part about Akari nearly clobbering me. I felt like it'd wreck her opinion of Akari, and I'd feel bad if she started hating Akari over something that really wasn't her fault. I think Toriko could look at it with a clear head if she knew the situation, but she'd still have some lingering discomfort about it.

“So, when you look with your right eye...is it still shining silver? Akari's head, I mean.”

“Oh, not anymore. It wasn't like that. There was this powerful glow when she got her memories back, but I took a quick peek later, and nothing. It felt like when you unclog a pipe, or pull the plug out of a drain.”

“That might be similar to how it was for me. When I put my finger in your eye, it was like I was undoing a tight knot.”

“So, maybe that ‘Hah!’ seals off the connection to the other world?”

“That’s gotta be what you got hit with initially. I’m sure of it.”

“Not that I remember it.”

I still hadn’t regained the memory of my first encounter with T-san. It wasn’t just me: Akari didn’t remember the white house or what happened there either.

“I’ve heard of people who get in a car accident having a blank in their memories the moment of the crash, so maybe it’s like that,” Toriko suggested.

“Could be.”

“If he’s cutting off people’s connections to the Otherside, do you think that this T-san is a benevolent third party?”

“You mean he thought Akari and I were possessed, and he was doing us a favor by exorcising it?”

“Wouldn’t that be how he saw it?”

“Some help he was. I lost my memories, I went blind in one eye, and worst of all...”

“Worst of all...?” Toriko innocently asked me to finish what I’d started to say then trailed off.

For a moment, I considered trying to play it off as something else, but...I didn’t.

I looked back at her. “And worst of all, he took you away from me.”

“Huh...?” Toriko looked at me in wide-eyed bewilderment. “Wh-What was that, out of nowhere? I mean, I’m glad to hear you say it, though.”

“I dunno. I got the feeling I should say these things while I can, or I’ll regret it later. If we both get Hah!-ed, I’ll never get the chance again.”

Toriko looked like she was about to cry. “Don’t say thaaat. You’re making me saaad.”

“Uh, but, I mean, that’s how it is, right?”

“Seriously, cut it out.”

Toriko grabbed my sleeve, shaking her head repeatedly.

Wh-What's gotten into you?

Toriko looked at me with wet eyes as I got flustered.

“Don’t leave me, Sorawo. I don’t wanna lose youuu!”

“I-It’s gonna be okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You better not.”

“No way. Not gonna happen.”

As I tried to soothe her, Toriko finally calmed down. She sniffled and wiped her eyes... *Oh, wow, she was seriously crying there.*

I had been trying my best to accept her affection for me, but I hadn’t expected the reaction it got, so I was pretty shaken up. But, uh, how was I supposed to anticipate that? How could one word from me reduce Toriko to that state? I’d been expecting her to get shy and start acting kinda dodgy, or to get all giddy and start acting out... I dunno, something more in that direction. I hadn’t been trying to make her cry.

People are hard to deal with...

I let out a small sigh, doing my best not to let Toriko notice.

For all her talk about us having “the closest relationship in the world,” I didn’t understand her in the slightest.

I was starting to feel a little exhausted despite not having done anything yet when Migiwa returned. A tall man in an expensive three-piece suit striding casually through a residential area, and he couldn’t have looked more out of place. Someone should call the police.

“I apologize for the delay. Did anything happen while I was away?”

“*No problem,*” Toriko replied in English.

“Yup,” I agreed.

Migiwa nodded. “Shall we be on our way, then?”

We turned back to the apartment once more.

“Kamikoshi-san, may I ask you to check it?”

“Sure.” I focused on my right eye in order to observe the apartment.

“Huh...?!” I let out an odd exclamation.

“What’s wrong?” Toriko asked.

“It’s gone...”

“What is?”

“The gate.”

“What?”

The door in the back, which had clearly been outlined in silver before, had lost its light. No matter how I scrutinized it with my right eye, it was just an ordinary old door.

“Then let us check it,” Migiwa said as I was getting flustered.

“Huh? But it’s not a gate anymore.”

“Whether this is a gate and whether T-san lives here are two separate matters. Even if he does not, surely there must still be some value in investigating a place that was once a gate.”

Now that he mentioned it, he might be right.

“Okay... Well, we’ll do it as planned, then.”

“Yes, please go ahead.”

Focusing back on the task at hand, we headed onto the lot with the apartment. I led the way with Toriko behind me. Migiwa was at the back so that if it looked like either of us were going to get hit with a Hah!, or actually did, he could drag us out of there, leaving no room for argument. Even if Toriko or I got taken out, the other one could undo the effects of the Hah!. We had asked Migiwa to ensure that at least one of us made it back to safety.

Timidly, we stood in front of the door at the very back. I could see that the finish on the wooden door was peeling. The mailbox didn’t have so much as a single flier in it, so even the postman must have realized this place was deserted.

Yeah, it didn't feel like anyone lived here. I'd gotten excited when I thought we'd found where T-san lived, but maybe I'd been getting ahead of myself.

As I was getting dispirited, Toriko tapped me on the shoulder.

"Huh...?" I turned to see Toriko pointing down. When I looked at my feet, I was shocked.

Here in this deserted apartment building, in a concrete hallway people probably hardly ever entered, there were a large number of footprints in the dust.

Following them with my eyes, it was clear they led in and out of this room. Through the door right in front of me.

Nodding to the two behind me, I turned back to the door, and pressed the doorbell.

It didn't ring, but I'd half-expected that. There was probably no electricity.

Knock, knock.

I knocked hard on the door.

Once again. *Knock, knock.*

I waited a while, but there was no response.

Letting out the breath I'd been holding, I turned back to the others.

"Looks like no one's here."

"Allow me," Migiwa said, stepping up to take our place. He had put on a pair of black gloves at some point. He grabbed the doorknob, and gave it a turn. It was locked.

"Go figure," Toriko murmured.

It's not gonna be that easy, huh... I was thinking when Migiwa said, "Please wait just a moment."

He pulled a key out of his pocket and inserted it in the keyhole. Then, using what looked like some kind of rubber stick, he tapped on the protruding part of the key. Once, twice. Migiwa grabbed the knob again, and it moved easily.

“It is open.”

“Huh...?!” I nearly raised my voice, but hurriedly covered my mouth.

“Fortunately, we will not have to use a crowbar,” he said, face completely calm, as he returned the key and the stick to his pocket.

“What’d you just do there?” Toriko asked, her surprise apparent.

“I used a bump key. You can open most locks this way.”

He didn’t even need a set of lockpicks... That was way too convenient. I made a mental note to ask for more details later.

“I am going to open the door now. Is that all right?”

Toriko and I nodded. Migiwa turned the knob and quickly opened the door.

No one was lying in wait. Just dust dancing through the air in a dark room.

It was a tiny apartment containing just a small kitchen area with a four-and-a-half tatami mat room beyond it. Light shone in through the gaps in the boarded-up windows. I shuddered for a moment when I imagined there being a mirror stand in this room too, but there wasn’t one. There wasn’t anything.

There were dirty footprints on the floor, on the wooden floor of the kitchen area, and the tatami mats beyond it too.

We entered the room without a word. Any hesitation we’d had over trespassing was long gone. Even if the “tenant” returned, it was clear that anyone who frequented this place was not an ordinary, sane human being.

“You think those are T-san’s footprints?” Toriko asked, looking down at the floor.

“The only thing I can tell you is that they’re man-sized.”

A detective like Sherlock Holmes might be able to discern all sorts of things from these footprints, but I sure couldn’t.

“Can you tell us anything, Migiwa-san?” I asked.

“Tracking is not my specialty, but...these footprints all seem to belong to one person. The soles are all the same.”

The footprints mostly just went in circles around and around the room. *What for?* I looked for any hint. One sun-blached wall had a rectangular mark on it where a poster or calendar must once have hung. Looking up, I saw that the cover over the ceiling light had been removed, leaving only the empty socket. I tried opening the closet, but it was empty. My right eye wasn't seeing anything abnormal either.

Once we finished looking around the room, Migiwa said, "I will stand watch outside. If anything happens, please call for me."

"Oh, okay. You do that."

Migiwa headed out the door, leaving Toriko and me alone in the room.

Okay, time to get to work. I looked down at our sole lead and cocked my head to the side.

"What do you think he was doing?" I wondered aloud.

"Just walking around...? Alone, here, by himself the whole time?"

"That's pretty creepy in its own way."

Most of the footprints were on the half tatami mat in the very center of the four-and-a-half tatami mat room. It was less like he'd walked around, and more like he'd stepped on it repeatedly.

"Did he have some kind of grudge against this tatami mat?" Toriko asked, imitating the footprints by stepping down hard on the mat.

"Hm...?" Her brow furrowed, and Toriko stopped moving.

"Is something up?"

"Listen." Toriko stepped on it again. She stepped on and off it alternately, and we listened closely...

"It sounds different, doesn't it?"

"It does."

There was only an echo when she stepped on the middle tatami mat.

"You think it's hollow under there?" Toriko asked.

We stuck our fingers under the edge of the tatami mat, and it only took a little pulling before it popped up. Underneath, there were incisions in the wooden floor that we could hook our fingers into too. We pulled up the wooden floor, and there was a dark hole with a wooden ladder that went straight down.

“There’s a basement...”

I would never have expected to find something like this under a four-and-a-half tatami mat room in an apartment.

Toriko turned on a flashlight, and started leaning closer, but I hurriedly stopped her. “Wait, there could be gas down there.”

“Oh, right.”

Sometimes, these poorly ventilated spaces under houses have carbon monoxide, which is heavier than air, built up in them. If you inhale it, you’ll pass out in an instant and be dead in no time—it’s an accident that happens sometimes on underground construction sites or when people are doing some kind of urban exploration.

We stayed up top and shone a flashlight down into the hole. The floor looked like concrete. It didn’t seem like there were puddles of water or mud down there.

I stuck my phone down the hole and snapped a few pictures. Looking through the images that were a bit overexposed due to the flash, it didn’t seem like a particularly large space. There were just walls in every direction. No monsters lying in wait for us either.

I stuck my head closer, and gave it a cautious sniff. It didn’t smell weird. I considered the possibility that there was flammable gas rather than carbon monoxide down there, but that seemed unlikely. I think I’d heard that natural gas is lighter than air, while propane is heavier. The smell we associate with gas is something they add to it to make leaks easier to notice, so this didn’t rule out the risk of an odorless flammable gas, but it seemed unlikely that sort of unprocessed gas would be building up in the middle of a residential area.

I dug through my shoulder bag and pulled out some outdoor matches. Toriko and I always carried the bare essentials of our exploration gear with us like this.

I struck a match, and slowly brought it closer to the hole. Seeing the flame was unchanged, I dropped it. The little fire fell into the hole, and...bounced off the floor down below. It didn't go out, and didn't flare up. I kept watching as it slowly burned itself out on the concrete, then looked up.

"Seems fine. Let's go down," I said.

"I'll go first..."

"If there's something abnormal, you won't be able to see it, Toriko. I have to lead the way."

Toriko bit her lip, giving me an accusatory look with upturned eyes. "You always use that as a reason to go first, Sorawo..."

"Er, um. It's not, uh..."

What's with those upturned eyes?! Is she doing that on purpose?!

"It... It's not my fault! I'm the only one who can do it!" I said, somehow managing to reboot the speech center of my brain, which had crashed because of how flustered I was.

"Well, yeah, but..."

I think we were both still feeling the effects of me making her cry earlier.

"You shine the flashlight from up above while I'm going down."

"Urgh... Okay."

I carefully placed my foot on the ladder. The steps were wood with the corners worn by friction. Old, but still surprisingly solid, they barely creaked at all.

Descending step by careful step, I took a breath of the stagnant air. It was a bit chilly and moist, but otherwise seemed normal. When I considered the possibility I might collapse from gas inhalation, I wished I'd bought some rope for a lifeline. We'd talked about needing it in the other world, but I never thought I'd find myself wanting a lifeline here in the surface world like this.

My feet touched the floor. I pulled out my own flashlight and checked that it was safe around me before looking back up the ladder. A worried Toriko peered

down through the hole in the middle of the dark ceiling.

“It’s okay. You can come down.”

It was my turn to shine a light for her. When Toriko got to the bottom of the ladder, she suddenly hugged me.

“Oh, thank goodness...”

“Listen, it’s only one floor down.”

“Well, you were talking about gas and stuff.”

“Um, how about we look around first, Toriko-san.”

I was trying to keep my expression as blasé as possible, but Toriko gave me an extra tight squeeze before letting go.

I... I can't get used to this! No way! It's never gonna happen!

I knew how catastrophically bad I was at hiding my own feelings, so I turned my back to Toriko, trying to calm down before shining my flashlight around the room.

It was a small basement, no different from the impression I’d gotten from my smartphone camera. Maybe about the same size as the tatami room above it. The four walls were covered with white plaster.

There was only one odd thing about the room: the west wall had a blue circle, about forty centimeters in diameter, painted on it. Like a blue sun, maybe?

“What do you think it is?”

“Umm?”

Toriko and I stood in front of the circle, heads cocked to the side.

When I tried my right eye...

“How’s it look?” Toriko asked.

“Nothing’s different. Doesn’t seem like it’s a gate.”

“If we assume T-san came here... What do you think he was doing in this basement?”

“Meditating?”

“Ohh. Like for spiritual training.”

“That, or worshipping?”

“He prays to the blue circle?”

“Seems possible, doesn’t it?” I said.

“No. It’s over there.”

“Makes sense,” Toriko agreed.

I nodded.

“I guess those footprints upstairs were from him stamping the entrance to the basement shut, huh?”

“So persistently?”

“Maybe the tatami mat wouldn’t go in?”

“I still think he walked around too much for that to be it, though,” I said.

“I thought this might happen.”

“Oh, I see,” Toriko said, apparently convinced.

We stayed in front of the blue sun thinking for a time. Blue was the color that symbolized the Otherside, so it might mean something, but we had way too little information to go on. It was frustrating because there was a hint of something I felt like I could almost understand.

That’s when we heard Migiwa’s voice from up above. “Are you both all right?”

“Oh, yeah, we’re okay!”

Come to think of it, we never even told Migiwa we’d found a basement. Toriko and I looked at one another.

“How about we head back?” I suggested.

“Yeah,” she agreed.

That was when I noticed something was amiss.

I was...kinda far from Toriko, wasn’t I?

Normally we stood so close together our shoulders were almost touching.

Looking down, I saw footprints that didn't belong to either of us. They were probably the same as the ones on the tatami upstairs.

Man-sized shoe prints, facing towards the blue sun.

Almost as if there was a person standing between Toriko and me...

I got a bad feeling and moved closer to Toriko.

Huh? Toriko's face seemed to say as she looked down at me.

"Let's head back quick," I said again, and Toriko nodded. We both hurried up the ladder, and into the room above.

"That is quite the odd thing you've found," Migiwa said, having come back into the room and peering into the hole. "If you were going to go down there, you could have told me first... It could be dangerous, in a variety of ways."

"You mean like gas? We did check for that."

I'm not sure if he was exasperated or amused, but Migiwa smiled faintly, shaking his head. It was a gesture he often made when talking to us—especially when talking to me.

"You are as reckless as ever, Kamikoshi-san."

"Are basements like this common?" Toriko asked while I was considering how to respond to that.

"Not very, I suspect. Organized criminal groups might build that sort of secret room to lock people up in, or as a safe house, but I cannot say I have heard of a basement being built in an ordinary apartment like this. Did he go to the trouble of digging it...? If not, it might be possible that the apartment was built over top of an old air raid shelter, or a farmer's root cellar, however."

"Why would they do that...?"

"I could not tell you."

We replaced the floor and put the tatami mat back in place. Like we'd thought, it didn't fit back in easily. T-san might have gone to a lot of trouble here.

The three of us then left the room. Migiwa used his bump key to lock up after

us.

“Hmm, we didn’t get any leads...” I mumbled to myself once we were away from the apartment and had walked to where Migiwa had parked the car. The only new information we’d been able to acquire was the photos of that basement and of the blue sun.

“I thought we’d be able to figure something out. Sorry to drag you along for this, Migiwa-san.”

“No, think nothing of it. This was important.”

“Well, yeah... Anyway, there’s not much else we can do but wait and see what happens next week.”

“Next week?” Toriko asked, sounding dubious.

“Yeah. I expect Templeborn-kun will be there at my next seminar.”

“Next week...”

Toriko and Migiwa looked at one another.

“Huh? Is something strange about that?”

“Next week is Golden Week, Sorawo. I’m pretty sure you have it off.”

“Oh...”

9

The long weekend in May getting in the way of us investigating the supernatural? Can that even happen?

Yes. Apparently it can...

I’ve seen all kinds of manga and anime, but I can’t really recall one where an investigation got called off because of a long weekend. I dunno, though. I may just not have seen the one where it happens. Maybe it happens all the time in stuff with a school setting.

Normally, I’d welcome the long weekend, but it was irritating that it had to come now, of all times. Still, arguing with the calendar wasn’t going to do me

any good. Changing our plan of attack, we decided to use this opportunity to do some work we'd wanted to do for a while but hadn't had the chance to.

For starters: making the route from the roof of the skeletal building to the ground safer.

The biggest drawback to the gate in Jinbouchou was the fact that the only route down from the thirty-meter-tall building was a single ladder. Fortunately, we'd been safe so far, but climbing up and down ten floors without a lifeline was insane, and exhausting to boot. I'd been feeling the need to do something about it, so it got kicked higher up on the priority list.

On the first day of the long weekend, we took our shopping list to the home center. We bought a bunch of stuff there, doing research on our phones as we went, and occasionally checking videos. We were cautious because we didn't want to regret our purchases, but that ate up a lot of time, and the shopping trip ended up having to continue the next day. After the home center we visited the outdoor shop, and a work clothes store. All said, we ended up with a lot of stuff to haul around.

On the third day, we took all that stuff with us to Kozakura's house.

"Why?"

That was the first word out of Kozakura's mouth when we appeared with a wheeled suitcase trundling along behind us.

"We talked about where the best place to prepare was, and we decided your house had the most space," Toriko answered as Kozakura glared at her, the top half of her face wrinkling up like a pickled plum.

"Did I never tell you before that my home isn't a public space? No, I guess I didn't. Normally, one doesn't need to do that."

"Um, we come bearing gifts." I slowly pushed forward a large paper bag, but her face did not unwrinkle. Inside the bag was the largest assortment of sweets you could buy from Gramercy Newyork in the underground section of the Seibu department store in Ikebukuro.

"What kind of idiot says that when giving someone a gift?"

“What am I supposed to say then...?”

“Do I look like an etiquette coach to you?” Kozakura said, letting out a sigh of exasperation. “Look, you can use the space if you want to, but if you break anything, I am going to brutally murder you.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t leave your trash here when you go home.”

“...Sure thing.”

“What was that pause?”

I had been somewhat hopeful that we would be able to put the empty boxes and other packaging out with Kozakura’s trash, so it took me a little longer than usual to respond. I happened to know that there were a whole bunch of empty Yodobashi and Amazon boxes piling up in the corner of her room from all the things she’d ordered online.

With some negotiating, we agreed that in exchange for me crushing those boxes, separating them, and tying them up with vinyl cord so that they were easy for Kozakura to take out on paper-recycling day, we were allowed to leave our trash too.

“Before you two tried to get all clever with bringing gifts, maybe you should have built up this sort of relationship first,” Kozakura said, her eyes distant somehow.

“What kind of relationship?” I asked.

“Payment for labor. Business between equal partners.”

“Haven’t we been finding Otherworld artifacts and selling them to you all this time?”

“I really regret teaching you this warped way of making money.”

“If you’ve got something better, I’m all ears. I can work part-time.”

“Yeah, me too,” Toriko piped in. “I’d do anything for you, Kozakura.”

“Don’t be so quick to agree. There isn’t a woman out there who’d do anything for me.”

“Kozakura-san?” I said questioningly.

Kozakura shook her head and frowned. “I’m the kind of person who thinks there’s nothing better than being able to eat without working for it, but I’d hate to admit it in front of you two.”

“Oh, that sounds like something Runa Urumi might say too.”

“Sorawo-chan, your taste in jokes is the worst. You’re making me wish I could sew your mouth shut.”

Anyway, we managed to secure a space to work. We carried the suitcase into the reception room and set to work. Between opening boxes, removing packaging, and taking off tags, we had a lot to do. We checked the extra parts for our construction tools, and committed everything in the manuals to memory. They’d be illegible once we got to the other world, so we needed to memorize anything important. If it became absolutely necessary, we could take the elevator on the roof of the skeletal building back to the surface world, but our lives might depend on using these tools properly, so we didn’t want to go in with only a fuzzy understanding.

Kozakura, who had shut herself in her room, occasionally poked her head into the reception room, probably curious about the sounds of various electric tools she was hearing.

“Sorry, are we being too loud?”

“Kozakura, do you mind if we charge some batteries?”

Kozakura’s brow furrowed as she looked at all of the things we had bought spread out on the floor.

“What are you two planning to do over there...?”

“Just a little...construction, I guess?”

In the time it took to do some test runs with the equipment out in the yard and to sort out Kozakura’s trash as promised, the sun set. We put the things we’d brought into a suitcase, then ordered takeout as a small way of making amends for the inconvenience we had caused. The three of us enjoyed drinks together as the third day came to a close.

On the fourth day, it was finally time to put the plan into action.

Toriko and I met up at Ochanomizu Station in the morning. The suitcase rattled along behind us as we walked down the hill in front of the station. We entered the usual building in Jinbouchou, and followed the same procedure as always. The woman on the fifth floor missed the elevator again today.

When we reached the roof, it was a little cloudy on the Otherside, the same as in the surface world. Through the gaps in the clouds, the sun cast a blurred light over the vast plains.

We left the suitcase in front of the elevator at first while we took a walk around the roof. Choosing one of the many thick pillars that supported the skeletal building near the center of the roof, we decided to test the tools we had brought on the floor attached to it.

Laying the suitcase on its side and putting down a blue tarp, we started pulling out all of the stuff.

Today, we were both dressed head to toe in work clothes, including steel-toed boots. It pissed me off seeing how cool Toriko managed to look even in this getup. When we had gone to the work clothes store and looked through their women's catalog, I had figured they wouldn't be as stylish as they looked on paper, but...then she came out of the changing room looking just like a catalog model. I couldn't stand it.

Once we had laid out all the tools and checked that we weren't missing any, I attached the diamond blade to the disk grinder. Then I drew a square outline on the floor in chalk to delineate our work space.

We both put on goggles to protect our eyes, as well as thick protective gloves.

"Okay, I'll give it a go," Toriko said, picking up the grinder.

"Carefully, okay?"

Toriko turned on the grinder. When the rapidly spinning diamond blade touched the concrete, there was a high-pitched noise and white powder danced through the air.

She followed the lines I had drawn initially to cut out a square. I watched with

bated breath as the lines slowly lengthened, and the starting point connected to the ending point.

Toriko turned it off, and let out a breath. "Is this how it goes, at first?"

"It might be good to put some cuts inside the frame too, but let's go with this for now."

"Okay. Right, next is the drill."

We attached a long bit to the end of the fully charged hammer drill. It was shaped like a submachine gun, and Toriko held it in both hands.

"You sure you don't want me to take over?"

"I'm good for now."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you, but do switch with me before you get tired. It's dangerous."

"Gotcha."

Toriko pressed the drill bit against the ground, putting the tip inside the groove left by the disk grinder. When she pulled the trigger of the hammer drill, there was an ear-piercing noise, and the bit sank into the concrete.

Initially, I had been thinking of using lifelines to make climbing up and down from the skeletal building safer. I figured we'd buy a harness and ropes, like they use for mountain climbing or on construction sites, and we could just use those when we were on the ladder.

But as we considered our options, I started to think that wouldn't be very effective. If we just slipped off the ladder, it was just a matter of returning to it once the lifeline stopped our fall, but if the ladder itself fell away, we might find ourselves stuck hanging there with no way to return. Since the skeletal building had no walls, we might be able to build up momentum and swing our way onto one of the floors, but...what then? If we were in a bad enough spot and couldn't even accomplish that, we'd just end up a couple of sun-dried, desiccated corpses hanging in the wind. Not exactly how I wanted to go out.

Even if one of us was still on the roof when the ladder fell, it probably wasn't realistic to expect she could pull the other one up. If we had a powered pulley

system, that might change things, but it would be a headache figuring out where to place it. Yeah...large as the roof was, there weren't many places we would have been able to safely attach our lifelines to. The fence was out of the question, so the only idea that came to mind was wrapping the rope around the elevator's enclosure.

So, we started talking about how first—whether we used ropes or pulleys—we were going to need to drill a hole in the roof to affix them to...and that's when I got an idea.

If we were going to drill through the concrete anyway, why not just punch a hole through to the lower floors?

Now, I thought it was crazy too at first, but the more I looked into it, the more realistic the idea seemed. It was apparently not all that uncommon to need to demolish concrete walls during DIY projects, and I came across videos of a woman doing it all by herself on YouTube. There were also people who said that old concrete was hard, and it was dangerous to cut through rebar, so you were better off hiring a professional. They were probably right, but as long as we were careful, it was possible for us to do it ourselves.

Besides, when I looked into the price of the tools we'd need to break through concrete, they weren't all that expensive. I thought it would run us hundreds of thousands of yen, but it was only tens of thousands.

This is it... Let's give it a go. Let's put holes in the skeletal building and make it so we can go up and down without using that long ladder.

With that plan in mind, we made the necessary preparations—and here we were today.

We'd practiced with the electric tools in Kozakura's yard the other day. There were some discarded concrete blocks and bricks in a corner of the garden that had been there for who knows how long that were perfect for testing.

Kozakura had watched while munching on the sweets we'd brought her. She grumbled something like, "Maybe this is how everything will be destroyed, and me and this house will disappear," but I think she was embracing the impermanence of all things a little too hard.

I wasn't going to wreck stuff indiscriminately.

Maybe it was because we'd bought some good tools, but the drill sank into the concrete so easily it was kind of funny to see. The drill had a small diameter though, and the concrete was a good ten centimeters thick, so it took a while for the hole to expand horizontally. Seeing the way things were going, we switched bits early in the process. This time, we put in a thick, round one called a core drill bit. These were apparently used for things like pipe laying.

The thicker bit meant that the digging went slower, but it opened a wider hole. When the progress suddenly slowed down, we knew we'd hit rebar. If we took it slow, the core drill would chew through it, then get back to tearing through the concrete. It was really satisfying seeing another cylinder of concrete added to the pile each time we pierced through to the other side, and it gave us a definite sense of progress. We'd considered cutting through the rebar with a disc cutter, but it was easier to punch through it with the core drill's powerful blade.

We took turns connecting the holes in the floor. The big risk with electric tools like these was that when you got the angle wrong or hit something that was harder than the material around it, the blade jumped. We had both studied pretty hard for this, though; we read the manual cover to cover and watched a bunch of tutorial videos.

We couldn't afford to get injured. If we got wounded here on the Otherside and couldn't move, no help would be coming. We could still head home from where we were now, but what if we went one floor down and broke a leg there? We'd never get back up to the roof, and probably wouldn't be able to make it down to the ground alive either.

If we weren't careful, we'd both end up getting too focused on the work, so we took periodic breaks, drank water, and ate portable rations. The rations were the same ones we ate while exploring. My favorites were the bite-sized salty youkan jelly, and kaki-pi, a mixture of rice crackers and peanuts, while Toriko had brought a plastic bottle filled with nuts and dried fruit, what you might call trail mix.

When we took our breaks from construction, the endless racket stopped,

making the usual silence here even more noticeable. It felt kind of peaceful, resting our backs against the fence, our coats open, exposing our sweaty skin to the wind.

“You look like you’re having fun, Sorawo.”

“Because I am.”

“You’re smiling.”

“Mmhm.”

I could tell I was grinning ear to ear. This was really fun. I was excited to explore the unknowns of the Otherside, and I enjoyed doing this sort of work too.

“Do you play games, Toriko?”

“Games? Like board games? Or mobile games?”

“Nah, like on the Playstation or Switch.”

“I don’t have either of those. We had game systems in the house when I was a kid though.”

“I don’t have one either, but I do watch gameplay videos. You know how they do stuff like making save points as they advance, and building bases all over, right?”

Toriko looked up as she thought about it for a bit before responding. “You mean in games like *Minecraft*?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Of course—even she knows Minecraft, I thought as I nodded.

“What about it?”

“I’m thinking...just maybe, I might be taking out my desire for all those games I used to want to play on the Otherside.”

“You’re treating exploration like a game, you mean?”

“Not quite... No, that’s not it. It’s more like... I remember the things I used to think while watching gameplay videos. I thought it must be fun, doing things

little by little, building a base of your own, increasing the things you can do, and then moving on again. I always wanted to try it for myself.”

I got embarrassed, talking about something this personal, and laughed despite myself.

“And you know what...hee hee. At some point, I found myself doing exactly that. Not in a game, but in real life.”

“A base all of your own...” Toriko glanced sideways at me. Sounding unamused, she asked, “Is me being here in the way of that?”

I returned her side-eye. “I don’t really think so.”

“Say a little more.”

“When you’re with me...”

“When I’m with you...?”

“It makes me happy...” When I gave in and said that, Toriko laughed out loud and suddenly rammed her shoulder into me.

“Hey! Cut that out!” I said.

“I’m happy too—seeing you be more honest about your feelings!”

“Was that honest just now?”

“I’d give it sixty points for honesty.”

“Pretty high score.”

“You’re too easy on yourself...”

“It’s good enough. If that’s a sixty, what does a hundred look like?”

“Uh, well...”

“You know what, forget it. Don’t tell me.”

“One hundred points would be—”

At that point, I turned on the hammer drill so I couldn’t hear the rest. Toriko was saying something indignant, and I could more or less guess what it was without hearing the words. Something like she was knocking my honesty score down to thirty points, I’ll bet.

We made holes with the core drill all around the outside of the square. Towards the end, we strategically left rebar in some places, moving forward carefully. At some point, the remaining rebar gave way and bent under the weight it was supporting. The thick slab of concrete hung down into the floor below, like a lid that opened inwards.

We switched over to the disc cutter. When the cutter's blade touched the bent rebar, there was an intense shower of sparks which bounced off of our goggles. We severed one bar after another; then, switching from the core drill bit to another bit for demolition, gave it a poke with the hammer drill, and the hunk of concrete finally fell to the floor below with a thud.

"We did it!"

"It's open!"

Our elated cheers echoed through the silence of the other world. We looked down at the square hole in the roof, savoring the sense of accomplishment. It was not a neat hole by any stretch of the imagination, but we could clean up the sides of it later. For now, it was time to head down.

We extended a collapsible ladder down the hole, resting the foot of it against the slab of concrete lying at the bottom for support. Once we were sure it was firmly set in place, we climbed down one at a time.



“Hey, we made it. It’s the tenth floor,” I said.

“How long did it take? Four hours?”

“About that? It went surprisingly fast...”

“The real problem is the drill’s charge, I guess? The battery held out though...”

“When you think we’ve still got another nine floors to go, it feels like such a slog.”

We took a stroll around the tenth floor, which we were visiting for the first time. There wasn’t really anything there: just an empty floor with the wind blowing through it. The only things obstructing our vision were the pillars. Based on what we had been able to see from the outside, the floors below were probably about the same. The only thing that was maybe a little fresh about it was that the roof above us blocked the sunlight.

“Where do you want to put the next hole?” I asked.

“Not too close to the first one, I guess? For structural reasons.”

“But it’d be inconvenient if they were too far apart. How about the next pillar over?”

“It gets pretty dark in the middle of the floor, huh? I’d like to get some lights in here,” Toriko replied.

“I’d like to get the place wired up with electricity... If we put a portable battery up on the roof and ran extension cables from there, do you think it’d get messy?”

“If we’re only going to use the lights when we need them, wouldn’t solar panels in the sunny spots of each floor do the job? If we wire up some proximity sensors too, we could have it so the lights go on and off automatically as we climb.”

“You’re pretty smart, huh, Toriko...”

“Why do you always sound so frustrated when you compliment me on that, Sorawo?”

“Urgh.” I hadn’t expected her to call me out on that, so I didn’t know how to

respond.

“Well, I’m nice, so I won’t get mad at you for thinking I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot...”

“Then what do you think?” Toriko asked, her tone a little cold, looking down at me as I tried to explain myself.

“Sorry... I was kind of being a jerk, huh?” I said hesitantly, but Toriko burst into a goofy grin and suddenly hugged me around the shoulders.

“Agh!”

“You’re so honest! I’ll give you seventy points for that!”

“Stop it! You’re all sweaty!” I struggled and pulled myself free of her. She was getting carried away!

While I was still trying to recover, Toriko was looking around for places to dig the next hole with a cool expression on her face. She brushed her hair back and turned to look at me. “You wanna do it today? I think the battery might last for one more floor.”

“Mmm. How about we think about it after lunch?”

“Oh, that sounds good to me. I’m starving!”

We returned to the roof, taking only the bags with our valuables, and used the elevator to return to the surface world. We could have bought something on the way here in the morning, but since we were already in the city, it seemed like a waste not to eat out.

Since we were wearing work clothes caked with concrete dust, it took some time to decide where to go. We’d wiped our faces and hands at least, but I’d still feel bad going to anywhere that was kept super clean. Settling on a place that served Western-style dishes, we joined the salarymen and construction workers for a hearty meal. I ordered tonkatsu curry with a black roux and lots of cheese, while Toriko had roasted flounder with ginger. We scarfed down a whole bunch of chopped cabbage and white rice on top of that and headed back to the elevator with our bellies full.

We took about an hour’s nap on the roof of the skeletal building, then got

back to work on the tenth floor.

It was our second time now, so we knew what we were doing. This time, we didn't start by drawing an outline with the disc cutter: we just went right at it with the core drill. We had charged it with the battery we'd brought, so the hammer drill's power lasted.

Opening a hole to the ninth floor still took three and a half hours. It looked like we wouldn't be able to shave much time off the process.

"Two floors is the limit even if we work all day, huh? That's five days minimum to reach the ground..."

"Sorawo, don't tell me you're planning to do this all over the long weekend."

"Can't we?"

"I think it's better not to rush things. We're on an adrenaline high right now, but I predict we're going to have some serious muscle pain tomorrow."

"Urgh, you could be right."

We'd been carrying around heavy electrical tools the whole time and holding them against the concrete while bracing against the vibrations, so it definitely had been hard work.

The setting sun shone in from the side, lighting up the floor. We hauled our exhausted bodies back up to the roof, then put our tools away in the suitcase. The ladders could be left in place, so our luggage would be just a little bit lighter on the way back.

We rushed into the elevator before night fell. When the doors closed, we breathed a sigh of relief. Our bodies were a mess of sweat and dust. Toriko looked exhausted.

Reaching the first floor, we went outside, pulling the suitcase behind us. I looked around the evening streets, thinking for a moment. "There's a public bath that's within walking distance from here. A real old-timey place."

"Huh?"

I looked at the blank reaction on Toriko's face. "Want to go take a bath?"

Suddenly, her eyes snapped wide open. “C-Can we?!”

“Your reaction’s scaring me.”

“But...”

No buts.

That little mental comeback made me feel like I was slowly turning into Kozakura.

“Well, how about it? Us hitting up the bath?”

“Yep, yep.”

“Well, let’s go then.”

I walked along, checking the map on my phone, and Toriko ran along after me.

“S-Sorawo... What’s this about, all of a sudden?”

“Nothing. You want to wash up too, right?”

“But...”

I could understand why Toriko was confused. I let out a sigh. “I’ve learned my lesson. You were really looking forward to the love hotel girls’ party, right? But I let you down there, so I’ve been wanting to make it up to you somehow.”

“Sorawooo...”

“But...” Seeing Toriko’s eyes water as she looked at me, I raised one finger and said, “No flirting in the bath. It’s a public place, you know?”

“Flirting?!”

That wording may have been a mistake...

“Anyway, so long as you mind your manners, I’ll take as many baths with you as you want.”

“As many as I want?!”

“Oh, whatever. Let’s go.” I was tired of minding my words at this point.

“Toriko. You know, I don’t think you’re an idiot, but...there are these times

when your intellect seems to experience a precipitous decline.”

“Huh? Like when?”

“Like right now!!!”

10

I was exhausted the next day, just like Toriko had predicted. I had been using unfamiliar electrical tools and crawling on the floor while working all day, so all the muscles I didn't normally use were screaming at me.

I finally got up in the evening and bought a boxed meal at the convenience store. That was it for the fifth day of vacation.

On the sixth day, we went out shopping and bought more collapsible stepladders, as well as some clasps to fix them in place. Once we could travel through the skeletal building, the trip up and down would be much safer, and we could get some use out of all of the previously dead space from the tenth floor to the second. We'd have a whole building to ourselves!

Sure, it was a faulty building with no walls, but we could get those in if we needed them. I was pretty excited about it.

I was vaguely aware that, even once we had it, most of that space was going to go unused. But who cares? It was a big house. No, that's not it... A castle? A fortress? Anyway, it was a base all our own on the Otherside, and just thinking about that made it feel like there were all these new possibilities opening up.

“It's like a wizard's tower, huh?” Toriko said while we were shopping, and the analogy struck a chord with me.

That's it! I thought, pointing at her. *Toriko gets it...*

“In the picture books I read as a kid, I saw a wizard's tower standing in a secluded forest, and I always admired it. Like, I wanna live in one of those myself.”

“I get that,” I emphatically agreed. Having spent as much time with her as I had, I was gradually starting to figure things out. I wasn't the only one with a romantic view of the Otherside.

Thinking back on it, Toriko was the one who'd looked at the initial map I'd drawn and said it was like a treasure map. Her eyes sparkled when she saw the Mayoiga's kitchen too. I had been embarrassed by the childish way I looked at the Otherside, so it was surprising to me that Toriko was the same way.

When I told her that, Toriko got a little embarrassed. "I'm not good at making friends, so I've always played alone a lot, you know? Making fantasy kingdoms, thinking up imaginary friends... So when I found out about the Otherside, I was super excited."

I just looked at her when she said that, unable to say a word. When we first met, I had assumed she was the opposite of me, a sunny girl who got along well with other people.

"Wh-What? What's that face for?"

"Nah. I was just thinking how blind I was."

"Huh...?"

What about now? Was I able to see a little better?

The way Toriko kept on getting closer to me hadn't changed from the beginning. And as for me getting spooked and running away, well, I had finally started holding my ground and was trying to accept her. I don't know if I was accomplishing that, but, well...I was trying, at least.

Ever since Toriko gave up on rescuing Satsuki Uruma—has she? Really? I'm still uneasy about that—I had worried I was dragging her along on my expeditions when she didn't want to be there, but from what I was seeing now, it seemed fine.

"What should we do tomorrow?" I asked. "Go out and do some more construction?"

"Hmm. Tomorrow's looking like it's gonna be rainy."

"Ohh. Maybe not, then. The weather there seems to be pretty well in sync with the weather here."

"Hauling a massive suitcase through the rain's not much fun either."

"Okay, let's save it for another time, then."

“We’re running out of vacation time.”

“It sure went by fast, huh?”

Ultimately, we were only able to work for one day of the break. We’d have to tackle it a little bit at a time on our weekends.

We wanted to put something over the hole to block the rain. While we were at it, we might as well install a tent and tarp to make it more comfortable. We could also put a metal frame made of iron pipes around the hole along with some pulleys to make lowering heavy freight easier. Or we could expand the hole to allow us to bring larger items down... The more we talked about it, the more things there were we wanted to do.

The seventh day of the break was rainy, as forecasted. We each stayed cooped up in our own homes, doing homework and other boring stuff. Wait a minute... I had to do a presentation for the next seminar. Yikes. I didn’t have anything prepared at all.

And so, the Thursday after the end of the Golden Week break came. When I went to the university, unusually, there was a person who tried to talk to me.

“Um, Kamikoshi-san, I wanted to talk to you about something. Do you mind?”

I looked at her, dumbfounded. I was about to go home after my Regional and Cultural Studies lecture when someone called out like they had been waiting to ambush me. It was a girl with a familiar face. Um, er, her name was...

“I’m Benimori. We’re in the same seminar.”

“Ohh, right.” Now I remembered. Benimori-san. One of the girls in my seminar. Kinda pudgy in a cute way, talks a lot, pretty likable.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“Um... It’s a little hard to say.”

“Uh...”

Benimori-san looked around anxiously, then lowering her voice, said, “I’ve heard you can...sense spirits, Kamikoshi-san.”

I rolled my eyes involuntarily.

Not this again...

“Who was it?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“Who was saying that? Who told you?”

“Huh? Uh, who was it again...? I dunno. But I feel like it was a while ago. Like, maybe even in first year.”

“Oh, I see...”

Did I plant the seeds of this myself?

“I can’t sense spirits. Bye.”

“Ah! Wait, wait. But you *do* know a lot about ghost stories, right?”

“Well...a little,” I answered reflexively, then regretted it. I should have said no.

Benimori’s expression relaxed with relief, and she started talking really fast. “Oh, thank goodness! I was having a little trouble with something related to ghost stories, but I had no one I could turn to, and you were the only one I could think of, Kamikoshi-san.”

Something to do with ghost stories...?

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

Benimori-san smiled, as if she knew it would catch my interest. “Do you have time after this?”

She had caught me, hook, line, and sinker.

There was no use fighting it now. I foolishly followed Benimori-san to the university cafeteria to listen to her request. I sat down in the corner seat where I’d been with Akari not that long ago.

“During Golden Week, a number of friends from our seminar started talking about doing a test of courage,” Benimori-san started to explain.

“Why?!” I immediately shot back.

“Huh?”

“Why would you do a test of courage?”

“Huh, what’s wrong with that?”

“Where do I start...?”

Stupid university kids go to do a test of courage, do stupid stuff, and bad stuff happens to them. That’s a super common template for ghost stories. Anyway, I was starting to think tests of courage were a thing that only happened in fiction, but here was someone who really did one...

I slumped down, resting my cheeks on my palms. “Let me guess, you went and did something dumb, and now you’re cursed, right?” I said offhandedly.

“I knew you’d pick up on this fast! Yeah, that’s right! We’re all in real trouble,” Benimori-san said, utterly carefree. I was only getting more and more fed up.

“You’ve come to the wrong person. The only thing someone who knows ghost stories can do for you is say, ‘I’ve heard a story like that before,’ and maybe rate yours.”

“Is that how it is?”

“Why not try a temple? Or a shrine? Not that I know if it’ll help.” I feel like I said something similar to Akari during the Ninja Cats incident. “Don’t tell me...you already went, and they were like, ‘What have you done?!’”

Going to a temple for help and being yelled at by a priest was another cliché. We had actually encountered an Otherside entity modeled on a story like that—when the Yamanoke attacked us on the revolving observation platform.

“We didn’t go to a temple, but instead...” Benimori-san responded, a kind of awkward expression on her face. I had a bad feeling about this. “You know T-kun, right? From our seminar.”

Ahh... So that’s where this all leads...? Is that it? Is this how he approaches us?

I pressed a hand to my forehead and thought.

When Benimori-san came to me for advice, I kind of picked up on there being something going on. Wasn’t this another Otherside incident, just like with Akari?

Something Kozakura once said crossed my mind.

Unreasonable events clustered together... Forming a seemingly meaningful context... Yet with no clear indicator whether this is a malicious threat, or a benevolent sign...

Kozakura's mutterings had been made with regards to Satsuki Uruma's disappearance, but based on experiences I'd had since then, they more or less described being approached by the Otherside.

Is that what this is too...?

"Um, Kamikoshi-san?" she called my name, sounding bewildered, and I looked up.

"What?"

"You suddenly got really quiet. Are you okay?"

"You call him T-kun?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah. I hear he was born in a temple, so take the first letter of that and he's T-kun."

"Do you know his real name?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't. Weird, considering we're in the same seminar. Ah ha ha."

Go figure, I thought. I'm sure he doesn't even have a real name.

I'd gone back and forth on what I thought at first, but he probably wasn't a Fourth Kind contactee with a physical body. He was a phenomenon that took the form of a person. That meant I hadn't only met him the moment I got Hah!-ed.

I think I was currently in the process of encountering the Otherside phenomenon that expressed itself in the form of the ghost story "T-san the Templeborn." This sequence of events itself was an example of humans having close encounters with the other world that follow the outline of ghost stories, and what I recognized as an attempt by the Otherside to approach me.

I let out a sigh, leaning back in my chair.

"Kamikoshi-san?"

“Okay...”

“Huh?”

“Fine. I’ll hear you out. Fill me in on the details.”

Benimori-san gulped, surprised by my sudden change in attitude, then began telling her story.

11

It was the second day of break when Benimori-san and the others went to do their test of courage. One of them mentioned rumors that there was a haunted place near the university, and they ended up deciding on going there.

“We’d actually been talking since some time before the break...maybe the day of our last seminar. A bunch of us went out to eat together, and I think it came up then.”

That was the day Akari and I were tailing T-san.

“Right, right, I remember now. Actually, it was kind of your fault too, Kamikoshi-san.”

“Huh? *My* fault?”

“Okay, fault’s not the right word. Um, you’re pretty famous for being into scary stories, so—”

“Oh, I’m famous for it...”

“Yeah, like, at the start of first year, during our department’s party to welcome new students, you got in a fight with the second-and third-years over it, and then left in a huff. That left a real impact. I was surprised.”

Urgh...

Come to think of it, yeah, I think that was a thing that happened. I wish I could have left it forgotten, though.

“You were a loner after that, and nobody knew you all that well. But then in second year, you started showing up wearing this flashy color contact in just one eye, so you really stood out, and you were walking around with a girl who

looks like an amateur model. She's blonde and ridiculously pretty."

"Uh, yeah."

"That got people talking again, and then there were rumors you fixed a girl in another department's troubles with a spiritual phenomenon of some kind, and everyone just sort of accepted it as you just being that kind of person."

"R-Right..."

That had to be Akari. It wasn't a spiritual phenomenon attacking her, it was actually the Ninja Cats, but I wasn't going to correct Benimori-san since it would just complicate things.

"After that... I just had classes that overlapped with yours occasionally, and I didn't know you all that well, but when we had our first seminar together, you introduced yourself saying you were into true ghost stories. I thought, 'Yeah, she hasn't changed.'"

"You were there then, Benimori-san?"

"I was, yeah. It was the first class and all."

"What was I doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't remember that well."

"Huh...? Were you drinking? Or..."

Benimori-san said that in a kind of jokey way, but I could see she was a little suspicious. Noticing that, I hurriedly said, "No, no! I'm not doing any weird drugs, okay?!"

"Y-Yeah?"

"You know how I was wearing an eye patch a little while ago? I apparently hit my head somewhere. Got a concussion."

"Oh, wow. Sorry. That sounds awful. You okay now?"

"Yeah, just fine." Maybe because I'd told Akari this lie once already, even I was surprised by how smoothly it came out.

“Hmm... What *were* you doing that day, Kamikoshi-san...?” Benimori-san, who believed my lie, stared into midair with a serious look on her face. “Oh, I’ve got it. After seminar ended, when we were going home, I noticed you left in a big hurry.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. There was someone who left before you, and it looked like you were chasing after them.”

Trying to chase after someone...?

It could be that I’d noticed there was something abnormal about T-san at that point, and I was going after him. I feel like that’s a thing I’d do. At the very least, I’d want to figure out what he was for sure.

And that’s when I got Hah!-ed...

“The pieces all fit...”

“Really? That’s good.” Benimori-san sounded relieved.

“So...why is it *my* fault you guys did a test of courage?”

“Oh, right, right. I was talking with some friends, and you came up in conversation. Like, about how you’d been wearing an eye patch for two weeks in a row, what’s up with that? Or how you’d been so into ghost stories, so what happened?”

It felt pretty bad to find out they’d been talking about me behind my back. I frowned. “And?”

“That led to us saying like, ‘Oh, hey, did you know there’s a haunted spot near the university?’ We’d been drinking, so we decided to go check it out on the spur of the moment.”

I just came up during the conversation! Don’t pin this on me!

This was such a perfect university student test of courage story move I could only sigh. In real ghost stories, the people who go down this route never get off easy.

No, seriously, I can’t believe there are actually people who do this...

I was so far past the point of exasperation that I was practically impressed.

It was the same pattern as those American horror movies where people decide to stay at a campsite where a crazed killer lives, and then everyone but the heroine dies. If you were putting together a list of these things, “Drunk university students do a test of courage at a haunted place” would be a serious contender for Japan’s slot on the list.

“Where is it? This haunted place.”

“Erm, it’s behind the co-op, so on the west side of the university, I guess? There’s a residential area there, right?”

Don’t tell me...

“We go in there, and... It’s a bit of a pain to explain. Just a sec, okay?”

As Benimori-san opened up Google Maps on her phone, I felt like I was watching an accident unfold in front of me. Just as I expected, the “haunted place” that appeared on the screen was that apartment building.

“I knew it...”

“You knew about it, huh? Pretty impressive, Kamikoshi-san.”

The compliment didn’t make me happy at all.

“It’s the ultimate stigmatized property, where somebody’s died in all eight rooms, right?” Benimori-san said, lowering her voice.

“I didn’t know that... Was it on Oshimaland?”

“What’s that?”

“The stigmatized property information site.”

“Huh? I never even knew that existed! You sure are amazing, Kamikoshi-san!”

I just assumed everyone knows about Oshimaland. Although, even if I looked it up, that info probably wasn’t on there. Someone died in every room? Even for a rumor, that sounded too sketchy.

“So, you just went on over there to check it out?”

“At first, we didn’t intend to go in, of course. That would be trespassing.”

“Uh-huh.”

They’d had more reason left than I’d thought.

“But once we were in front of the apartment building, everyone went kind of crazy.”

Benimori-san had been fine telling the story up until this point, but now she started shuddering.

“It was me, Cai-san, Doita-kun, and Arayama-kun there.”

I vaguely recognized those names, but I couldn’t put faces to them.

“So then Arayama-kun said he’d seen someone in the second floor window. With a face like kneaded clay. But no one else had seen them. Next, Cai-san said there was a person in front of the door at the back of the first floor. I was already scared, so I said we should go home, but after talking for a bit we realized that Arayama-kun was gone.”

“Ahh...”

“Just as I was going ‘Huh?’ I saw the door at the back of the first floor was open. It made no sense, so I tried calling him, and his phone started ringing from inside the room!”

“Yeah... That is scary.”

The silence of a residential area at midnight, the suddenly vanishing companion, the phone ringing inside a dark apartment. I could imagine the scene as if I had been right there with them.

“‘Did Arayama-kun go into the apartment alone? Why?’ Cai-san and I were both on the verge of tears. Then Doita-kun volunteered to go look. I told him not to, but he seemed kinda excited.”

Maybe not so much excited as confused.

“He stepped inside as Cai and I watched, and went to the door in the back. That’s where he froze stiff. I was wondering what was up when something spoke to him through the door.”

“Arayama-kun from inside, you mean...?” I asked, but she shook her head.

Benimori-san was visibly shaking at this point.

“That’s what I thought at first too. But it was weird. Arayama-kun’s the same age as us, and we’re close, so there’s no reason Doita-kun would suddenly start talking so politely to him, but in a kind of relaxed way. Like, ‘Hello, sir. Yes. Oh, hold on, uhh, I dunno, sir, sorry.’”

The way Benimori-san suddenly started trying to imitate Doita-kun’s speech style felt out of place, and I wasn’t sure how to react. As I sat there, confused, she continued rambling on.

“‘Doita-kun?’ I tried calling his name, but he ignored me and kept talking. ‘Hey!’ I called again, and he turned towards us. ‘Yessir! I’ll bring them right away!’ he said in this really loud voice. It was midnight, you know? His eyes were wide! And then he started running towards us! He screamed, and we did too! In the middle of a residential area! At midnight! He comes running at us, grinning! And then a man with a saw comes out of the room behind him! He has a smashed face, full of nails, and he’s carrying a saw! He looks at us, and—”

“That’s as far as you go.”

“—we hear T-kun’s voice, and—”

“Hah!!!”

With a shout that felt like it was slamming into me, light exploded in front of my eyes. It was so brilliant it seemed to blot out my vision. The next thing I knew, I had tumbled out of my chair, to the floor. Like I’d been unconscious for a moment.

When I looked up, dazed, I saw that guy standing behind Benimori-san’s chair. Like the first time I saw him, he was a young man with shoulder-length hair, and a wart in the middle of his forehead like the Buddha’s. It was T-san.

“Good grief. You’re making this hard for me.” T-san glanced at me. “DS Research, huh? But it looks like I’ve caught some awfully small fish.”

What happened...? Why does T-san know DS Research’s name...?

I struggled to get up. T-san turned his back on me, as if he’d lost interest.

“It’s not a man’s job to make cute girls scared for no reason...”

T-san walked away, dissolving into light, and then...

“Ma’am?”

“Huh...?” I blinked and looked up. I was sitting alone at a table in a corner of the cafeteria. It was already dark outside.

I was the only one left.

“I’m sorry, but it’s about time for us to close, so...”

“Oh! Okay,” I responded reflexively to the cafeteria staff member, then looked down at the table. A glass of water, a half-drunk cup of tea, and an empty cake plate. The bill left in front of me was for one. The seat across from me was empty. No Benimori-san, and no T-san either. That side of the table had been wiped clean with not a single fingerprint left behind.

As if I had been alone from the beginning.

The staff glanced furtively at me as they closed up shop. Still in a daze, I rose from my seat, and took my bill to the register.

“Thank you. One cake set.”

“Um, excuse me,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Wasn’t there anyone else but me?”

“No...?” The employee at the register looked at me in confusion as I left the cafeteria.

I looked back out of curiosity, and the sign on the glass door turned to “CLOSED.” At almost the exact same time, the lights went out and the cafeteria went totally dark.

It was silent after that, and no one came out.

It felt so unreal that I had to wonder if I was dreaming.

T-san got me again... Is that it?

I hadn’t had my memories knocked out of me with a “Hah!” this time, but I felt certain that I had been attacked.

But how? What kind of attack?

When and where did he get me...?

I pulled out my phone to check the time, and I had a missed call. Toriko and Kozakura had both called me multiple times in the last twenty minutes.

Then, just as I was noticing that, Toriko called again.

“Hello? What’s up?”

When I answered the phone, I heard Toriko gulp. Her relief was palpable.
“Whew... I’m glad you were okay.”

“Sorry, I didn’t notice your calls. What is it?”

“T-san showed up!”

“Huh...? Where?”

“They say DS Research was attacked.”

“Huh? Attacked...? What do you mean?”

Before my mind could catch up, Toriko started rambling on the other end of the line.

“He showed up all of a sudden, and Hah!-ed the rooms with the Fourth Kinds! I was so worried, I thought you might have gotten caught up in it again!”

12

No matter how much I rushed, it was still over an hour from my university in Minami-Yono to Tameike-Sannou where DS Research was located. I had to take a bus from the university to the station, and then take the trains from there, so it was eight o’clock at night—long after I had received the call—by the time I actually arrived.

I had been able to contact Toriko, Kozakura, and even Migiwa, so I found out early on that none of us had had our memories Hah!-ed to oblivion. That was a relief, but before I could ask for more details on what happened, Migiwa stopped responding.

Was there still chaos at the scene? Toriko and Kozakura had agreed we should meet up there in order to get to grips with the situation. I tried calling Migiwa one more time when I got above ground at Tameike-Sannou Station, and this time it went through.

“I apologize. I was unable to spare my hands for a while.”

“Oh, good. You’re safe. I’ll be there soon too. Is it okay if I come up?”

“Yes. The elevator should be in order, so come in the same way as usual.”

I walked down the ramp into the underground parking garage, then boarded the elevator. Not being a member of DS Research, I didn’t have a key to open the panel with the hidden floor buttons. Instead, I pressed and held the emergency call button, and identified myself to the microphone.

“It’s Kamikoshi.”

There was no response, but the elevator began to ascend. It stopped at a place with no floor number displayed. The smell of disinfectant assailed my nose as the door opened.

Toriko and Kozakura were waiting in the elevator hall.

“Sorawo!”

“Sorry I’m late. What’s the situation?”

“Well...”

“It’s a real headache. Migiwa’s waiting, so let’s go,” Kozakura answered instead of Toriko.

“Waiting for me?”

“He needs your eye.”

We went from the elevator hall to the lobby; there were ten of Torchlight’s operators there in gray work clothes standing with Migiwa, talking about something. They were all carrying handguns and Tasers.

“Migiwa-san.”

“Ah, Kamikoshi-san, thank you for taking the trouble to come here,” Migiwa said, bowing as he noticed me.

“I didn’t really understand what was going on over the phone. What happened here?”

“A number of the patients were hurt. We want to handle it as soon as possible, but we have been unable to approach the hospital rooms.” Migiwa pointed in the direction of the long corridor lined with hospital rooms. The entrance was blocked off by a simple fire door.

“The cameras were taken out, so we are not fully aware of the situation, but...” Migiwa turned the tablet he was holding towards me and played a video.

It was from a security camera in a high position. A man appeared from the edge of the screen. He stood easily over 180 centimeters, and had long hair that reached down as far as his jacketed back. It was T-san.

“This is from two and a half hours ago. The man suddenly showed up inside the ward. There was no sign of him having used the elevator or stairs. We can only say that he spontaneously appeared.”

T-san turned back to face the camera, shifting his sunglasses aside and looking at the lens. Suddenly, the screen warped, and filled with static. In the distorted image, there was a figure—no longer in human shape—moving around, and I could just barely make it out as it vanished out of frame.

“What was that...?”

“We are not clear on the principles of how it works, but we have previously had a patient here who could also transform image-and video-storage media. This may be a similar phenomenon.”

“I’m sure you’ve tried this yourselves, but taking photos in the other world doesn’t work. Sometimes you’ll get scenery you know you couldn’t have photographed, or something that looks like a ghost photo. It seems that phenomena from the Otherside tend to reject being recorded,” Kozakura interjected.

Toriko and I nodded. Filming the Otherside was, of course, something I had tried early on. It didn’t affect just photographs, but video too. I’d never managed to take a single decent photo. They came out at angles that looked like someone else must have taken them, and sometimes we were even in the

frame ourselves. The bizarre nature of them only became apparent after returning to the surface world, so in the other world they looked like they'd come out just fine. I'd disposed of the creepy ones immediately, but I still had some of the ones that weren't that scary, or that I thought looked funny or stylish in my phone.

Migiwa switched to a recording from a different camera. This one was in one of the hospital rooms. By the edge of the wall, there was something that looked like a mound of paper, and it was fluttering as if it were in the wind. It was one of the Fourth Kinds that I'd seen here before. The door opened, and T-san entered.

"The door wasn't locked?" I asked.

"Of course it was," Migawa informed me.

T-san raised his right hand, opening his mouth wide. Even in a recording without sound, I could tell it was a "Hah!" There was a pale flash of light, and the screen whited out. As we watched, the hospital room slowly reappeared, starting from the edges of the screen, leaving some warped concentric circles burned in. It was really hard to make out what was going on inside the room. The Fourth Kind that had seemed to be made of paper was now spread out across the floor, making it look as if someone had dropped a stack of photocopier paper. T-san was nowhere to be seen.

Migiwa repeatedly swiped across his tablet, moving from one fragmentary recording of T-san to the next.

"It seems a number of patients had contact with T-san in the same way."

"Did that guy...die?" Toriko mumbled.

"We have no way of knowing. We need to confirm for ourselves what happened, but we are unable to enter."

"Huh...? Hold on, is T-san still in there?" I asked, turning to look at the fire door.

"If he has left, we have been unable to confirm it, at least."

"Still, with all these people, and all these guns...don't you think you could take

him?”

It made sense for people like me or Toriko to be wary, but I found it odd that Migiwa and the Torchlight people were being so worried about the “Hah!”

Migiwa slowly shook his head in response. “It is not T-san that we are concerned about.”

He stopped swiping, and footage from a new camera appeared on screen.

It was a camera looking down from the corner of a room somewhere. We could see the back of a young woman in a patient gown, peering through the large window that faced onto the corridor.

The woman slowly backed away. From our perspective, we saw the door open.

The moment the camera picked up T-san, the screen was swallowed up by macroblocks.

“I see what you mean...” I groaned as the situation finally hit me.

That had been Runa Urumi’s hospital room on screen. T-san opened the soundproof prison she’d been sealed in. Toriko and I looked at one another.

“You think she got Hah!-ed?” Toriko asked.

“I wish...” I replied.

If Runa had been taken out by T-san, then that wasn’t my problem. If anything, I’d be glad to be rid of her. But if she hadn’t, it was way too dangerous to open the fire door. What if she said, “Kill each other,” the very instant they cracked open the door to look inside? Even if she didn’t choose something that pragmatic, there was still, “Don’t move,” or, “Go to sleep,” or anything really.

“Earplugs are ineffective against her Voice. We considered playing loud music, but were uncertain as to whether or not it would have any effect.”

“We should have experimented on her more, huh...?”

“I have no words.”

That had been meant as an expression of my own regret, but Migiwa ended up taking it as me blaming him. Speaking of blame, I had a sneaking suspicion

about my own responsibility here.

“Migiwa-san. This might be my fault.”

“Yours, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Well, at the university, before I came here...”

I explained the events in the cafeteria and that T-san had said the name DS Research at the time.

“So, I’m thinking that T-san might have come here after learning about DS Research through his contact with me.”

“I see... However, I have some suspicions of my own regarding that.”

“You do?”

“When I first saw the footage of T-san, I felt as though *I recognized him*. Yet, search through my memories as I might, I have no recollection of him. And there is one more thing... The other day, when I went with the two of you to that apartment the other day, I was standing watch outside, correct?”

“You did, yeah. While we were searching the basement.”

“When I think back on it now, there is something suspicious about my memories of that time. I felt as if I had suddenly returned to my senses, and it occurred to me that it had been some time since I heard any noise from the room where you two were, so I returned because that seemed strange.”

Now that he mentioned it, when we were lifting up the tatami mat and talking about how we found a basement, Migiwa hadn’t reacted at all despite being right outside.

“I cannot be certain, but I suspect I made contact with T-san at that point. It seems more likely that he discovered the existence of DS Research through me than you, Kamikoshi-san.”

I couldn’t say anything one way or the other, but maybe this was Migiwa’s way of trying to lower the emotional burden on me. With that thought in mind, I changed gears. “Whatever the case, it’s not important right now. The one definite thing is that you can’t open that door without me and Toriko here,” I said.

“Correct. I know this is a great imposition, and I am hesitant to ask this of you, but—”

“No, we’ll do it, we’ll do it. Don’t worry about it. Right, Toriko?”

“Of course.” Toriko’s reply came easily, as if it were the natural thing to do. Of course, to her it *was* completely natural.

Honestly, when we first met, I had found her willingness to offer a helping hand to others insufferable. It felt natural to me to be more detached, so every time I saw that side of her, I felt guilty, like she was revealing an ugly side of myself.

Even now, I don’t think I’ve become much of a better person. Despite that, at some point, I started to feel that Toriko’s awkward sense of nobility was stunning and cool.

“It’s been bothering me all this time, but where’s the kid?” Kozakura said, sounding on edge.

She meant the still unnamed girl we’d brought back from the Otherside.

“That is one of the reasons we need to check inside there as soon as possible,” Migiwa answered. His expression was more grim than usual.

The sound of the fire door opening echoed like a gunshot through the silent ward. The moment the door opened, Toriko and I poked our heads inside, and looked around rapidly. There was nobody in the long corridor. Doors had been left open here and there.

“Think it’s okay?” Toriko asked in a whisper. I nodded.

“Nobody’s here. I’m not seeing anything with my right eye either.”

I was watching the whole hallway with my right eye in anticipation of a surprise attack. In the corner of my vision, Toriko turned to give the signal to those behind us.

In order to avoid the effects of Runa Urumi’s Voice, Migiwa and the others were staying far behind. When you considered all the experts in rough business we had with us, it felt comical that Toriko and I were the only ones who could go through the fire door.

Toriko put in a rubber doorstep to keep the door from closing behind us then clapped me on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” I replied, stepping through the door. Toriko followed immediately after and came up alongside me. I wanted to focus on looking, so I hadn’t drawn my gun. Toriko was holding her Makarov out in front of her. The barrel was pointed down, but it was a position that allowed her to raise her wrist and shoot if anything showed itself. Her glove was off too.

We walked side by side, advancing down the hall at a relaxed pace, and I peered into the nearest room on the right side through its window. It was the one that belonged to the patient who had been transmogrified into something like a stack of paper. As we’d seen on camera, they were spread out across the floor—likely dead, I think, but I don’t have any idea where I’d have touched to check for a pulse, and I was too scared I’d be injured if I touched them anyhow.

Should I have felt bad about them dying? Or should I have been happy that they’d been released from the suffering of living in that awful state...? I didn’t know what to feel as I looked down at the remains which were no longer human in shape. Ultimately, we left without being able to say anything.

We moved on to checking the next room. When we’d seen it before, this was a dark room lit only with infrared light, and the Fourth Kind patient grew out of the dirt floor looking like a cross between a human and a sunflower. I was ready to come across another corpse lying on top of the soil, but...

“No one’s here...?”

“Looks that way,” Toriko said.

The room was empty. There was nothing but soil on the ground in the dim light.

“You think they got Hah!-ed to oblivion?” I asked.

“Is his ‘Hah!’ that powerful?”

“We still don’t even know what kind of attack it is...”

Looking at the open door, I spotted a small amount of dirt scattered on the floor out in the hall. There was no other trace of the patient who had been in

here.

I took a look inside the room opposite this one across the corridor. This one had a thick layer of dust on the floor and tracks across the length and width of it as if someone had been sweeping. Those tracks extended to the open door, so it seemed they had gone out. I crouched down to check, and there were trails of dust left in the hall too. It looked like whoever left those tracks had headed further in.

Suddenly, Toriko looked up and froze stiff. “Sorawo... Do you hear something?”

Taking my cue from her, I perked up my ears. “You’re right...”

It was a sound so faint it might be drowned out by the air conditioning. At first, I thought it was a radio with the volume turned down. Was someone talking? No, there was a melody... Were they humming?

We continued down the corridor, checking the rooms on both sides one by one. It wasn’t like all of the doors were open; the closed doors were still locked, and we saw living patients through the windows. Some of the rooms had motionless patients lying on the floor, but many of the others were deserted. There were footprints leading out the door and into the hall, wet skid marks, and discarded hospital gowns and towels. Every trace we could find led deeper inside.

All signs pointed towards Runa Urumi’s room, at the end of the hall...

Glancing behind us, there was an impromptu security camera made from a tablet taped to a pole in front of the fire door. Nodding to Migiwa and the others, who were no doubt watching us on the other side of the lens, we approached Runa’s room. I was able to hear the sound Toriko had noticed. Having come this close, I could tell it was some kind of song. Not one with lyrics, but a quiet humming.

“It’s a lullaby,” Toriko murmured in a voice so quiet only I could hear.

It was clear at this point that it was coming from Runa Urumi’s room. We looked at one another, bewildered, then began sneaking—though it might have been a bit late for that—towards the last room.

What we saw when we peered inside was unlike anything we had expected.

Runa Urumi was sitting on a bed in a gloomy room with the lights turned down, surrounded by a large number of Fourth Kinds. There had to be close to twenty of them. None touched her. They rested their heads on the sheets, laid at her feet, and generally tried to get as close as they could while still keeping a certain distance. Some were swaying in time with her humming. They all seemed to worship Runa, but it was peaceful, not zealous.

It was Runa herself singing. She was in the middle of the ring of Fourth Kinds, humming a broken song to herself. When she saw us through the window, of all things she could have done, she raised a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture.

If there was one person in this world who I didn't want telling me to be quiet, it was Runa Urumi. Despite being pretty bewildered by what we were seeing, we stuck our heads in the open door. Uh, actually, we couldn't go in any further than that. The room was full of Fourth Kinds, and we'd have had to step over the aberrant patients prostrating themselves on the floor in worship to get past the door.

Runa stopped humming. When it looked like she was going to speak, I tensed up. Toriko quickly pointed the barrel of her gun at her.

"What do you think we should do about this?" Runa said with a troubled smile. Contrary to my expectations, what came out of her mouth was a normal whisper, not aberrant in the slightest.

"Don't talk," Toriko warned in a hard tone.

Runa frowned as she looked at the gun pointed at her.

"Can we not do this? I know you don't have the guts to shoot anyway, Nishina-san."

"You wanna try me?"

"There's no need to. I know. You're such a nice person. Besides, we already did this bit once before, remember? Let's not be redundant."

When Toriko didn't respond or lower her weapon, Runa let out an exasperated sigh.

“What are you doing...?” I asked, looking at the Fourth Kinds gathered around her.

“I dunno, looks like I’m popular all of a sudden.”

“Popular...?”

“It must be my personal magnetism.”

“I’ll bet you brainwashed them again,” Toriko said bluntly. Runa looked at me with a relaxed smile.

“No, I didn’t. You can tell that, right, Kamikoshi-san?”

“It doesn’t look like she has...” I replied reluctantly. None of the twenty-something Fourth Kinds in my right eye had the Voice, which looked like a slug made of phosphorescence, inside of them. I had assumed she hadn’t learned her lesson and brainwashed them, so that was unexpected.

“See? Kamikoshi-san gets it. These little guys are here of their own free will.”

Runa’s tone was mocking, and Toriko’s finger trembled on the trigger. It might not have shown on her face, but she was ready to snap.

I didn’t care what happened to Runa, but if Toriko flipped out and shot her dead, that would probably leave some lasting damage on her psyche. I didn’t want that, so I decided to mediate. “Toriko, you can lower your gun.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah. But be ready to use your left hand at any moment.”

“Got it.” Toriko obediently lowered the gun.

“Aw, what a good girl, obeying your master like that.”

“...”

I quickly opened my mouth before Toriko could level the gun at Runa again. “What happened? Where’s T-san?”

“Who?”

“There was a young guy who came in here, right?”

“Oh... He took off somewhere a while ago.”

“Took off...? And he didn’t do anything to you?”

“It seems like he was bullying these little guys, but he didn’t do a thing to me,” Runa said, looking down at the Fourth Kinds around her. “When I looked out the window and saw him coming this way, that was a ‘yikes’ moment, but then he just came into the room. I said, ‘Go home,’ and he was gone in an instant.”

“So...you used the Voice, then?”

“Who *was* that?”

“T-san.”

“Tee-san?”

“You didn’t consider running away when the door opened?”

“Where to? The hall was blocked off, and there are no emergency exits...” Runa said, half smiling. “If this had been a fire, everyone locked in here would have been roasted alive. Real humane, huh?”

“I’m not sure you’re in any position to talk.”

“Didn’t you know? When a prison is burning, they let the prisoners go.”

There was no benefit in arguing with her. I decided to ignore the talk about what was or wasn’t humane. “What happened after T-san disappeared?” I asked.

“I stepped outside and took a look around the other rooms... No one ever told me, but this is a medical institution for the Gifted, huh? As I was looking around, figuring all this out, everyone was slumped over... I got a bad feeling, so I called out to them, saying, ‘Hey, are you okay? Hang in there,’ and that made them feel better. So I went around doing that for everyone I could find, and...well, they kind of got attached to me.”

“Wha...”

“I couldn’t save all of them, though... I’m a pretty good person, huh? Saving all these lives.”

If T-san’s “Hah!” was a power that severed the connection to the Otherside, it

was probably lethal to Fourth Kinds who had been transformed to the deepest parts of their bodies. Did that mean Runa had restored the connection with her Voice? Like Toriko had done for me, and I'd done for Akari.

"Why were you singing?"

"Everyone seemed to be suffering, and I didn't know what to do about it. Chatting or singing were the only things that came to mind. I tried talking to them, but I have no idea if they understood me or not. So I sang instead..."

"And you chose a lullaby?"

"Is there something wrong with that...?" I had just meant it as an offhand comment, but the look in her eyes was dangerous.

"Not really..."

I dunno if I touched a nerve, but I wasn't going to try and curry favor with an antisocial minor, and I had no intention of carefully trying to avoid any further landmines as we talked. I looked around the room again. "Did you see a kid? A little girl, about the age she should be in primary school."

"You mean the flickering girl?"

"Flickering?"

"She's here one moment, gone the next, right? If she's in here, I assume that means she's one of the Gifted, though."

"Do you know where she went?"

"Search me. Is she able to go invisible? If she is, then maybe she's around somewhere."

Runa had naturally accepted that the girl was a Fourth Kind—what she would call "Gifted." She had kept pet Fourth Kinds at the Farm. Maybe, as far as Runa was concerned, all of the victims that had been taken in by DS Research were comrades who, like her, had received the blessing of the "Blue World."

Just to be sure, I swept the room with my right eye. With so many people in here, it was really hard not to focus on any of them. As far as I could tell, that girl wasn't anywhere I could see, at least.

“So, what are you here for, Kamikoshi-san?”

“I came to check things out. With you here, we’re the only ones who could come in.”

“Wha? I don’t think you need to be so scared,” she said, sounding almost offended.

“I think there’s more than enough reason to be.”

“Okay, just think about it. You and Nishina-san came in here defenseless, but I haven’t done a thing to you, have I?”

“Because we could handle you if you did.”

“Oh, really? I could have asked these guys to attack you, you know?”

“I think I’d have noticed first. I could tell the ones you’d brainwashed apart.”

“But weren’t you surprised? Seeing that I’m a better girl than you thought.”
Runa grinned with her scarred face.

“What do you want to say?”

“Don’t I get a reward for being such a good girl?”

“Huh?”

“I just want a little freedom. More specifically, I want to go on the internet. I don’t need to be able to use my mic, I just want to read the net normally.”

“Even without your mic, I’m sure you wouldn’t write anything we’d want you writing.”

“I can’t even look things up now. What harm can that do? You can keep me from posting to social media. Even in jail, model prisoners get better treatment, right?”

When she said that, Runa got a deflated look on her face.

“Listen, I know they’re not going to let me out of here easily. Looking back, I was doing some pretty messed up stuff. You might not think so, but I’ve been reflecting on my actions.”

Toriko shook her head silently. I couldn’t believe a word of it either.

“Well, I can put in a good word for you, at least... Now can you break this little gathering? They’re going to want to examine the patients and stuff,” I said.

“Okey dokey. You hear her, folks? Everyone go back to your own rooms, and let the doctors take a good look at you.”

Runa clapped her hands and the patients obediently got to their feet (or started crawling, or rolling) and headed for the exit. Toriko and I made way for them and the victims warped by the Otherside passed by us in a bizarre procession.

I suddenly found myself kind of horrified. It wasn’t that the way they looked scared me. It felt incredibly wrong that they were meekly obeying Runa without the influence of her Voice. Every one of the patients here had heavy symptoms, and I had been told you couldn’t communicate with them, or even be sure they were conscious in some cases.

When everyone but us and Runa was gone, I asked, “How were you able to talk with them...?”

“We didn’t talk at all. It’s just that, as fellow Gifted of the Blue World, we can sort of understand one another. Isn’t that how it is for you two as well?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

“Oh, are you two not getting along, maybe?”

“We get along swimmingly.”

“Toriko...”

Don’t get all huffed up, jeez...

“Hold on. Given that we don’t understand you, doesn’t that make the whole idea just an illusion?” I asked.

“Does it? I feel like I understand what both of you are thinking really well.”

Now she was just spouting nonsense... Talking to her was a waste of time.

“Let’s go,” I said to Toriko, moving to leave the room while making sure I never let Runa out of my sight. The annoying thing about it was that if I focused on Runa herself, it would influence her psyche, so I had to keep my eye just a

little unfocused. When I had someone this dangerous in front of me, it was impossible to not focus on her at all, so I couldn't help looking at the phosphorescence coiled in Runa's neck occasionally. That silver sparkle was mainly in her throat, but extended up and down her backbone. In the instant it took to look away again, Runa's brain and the spinal cord hanging down from it looked like an independent creature, flickering inside her.

"Oh! Hold on a second."

Runa's voice brought my mind back to focusing on the usual layer, and the shining brain-jellyfish turned into a face.

"What...?"

"Since you're here already, could you let me go outside for just a bit?"

"Huh...?"

Now what? I scowled.

"Pretty pleeeease. I'll put this on, keep quiet, and be a good girl," Runa said sweetly, holding up the black muzzle with a mouthpiece.

"Okay, listen. I don't know what you're thinking, but there's no way that's happening."

"Aww, you meanie."

At that point I shut the door, checked it was locked, then left. I knew whatever face she was making would just get me mad, so I didn't look back.

When I went through the fire door into the lobby, and walked towards the meeting room where the others were waiting, Kozakura was standing outside the door. She looked up at us uneasily, pointing to her own ear.

"She didn't get you, right?"

"We're fine," I told her.

"She didn't even try," Toriko added.

"Well, okay then. Because if she got the two of you, we'd be finished..."

We went into the meeting room with Kozakura, and explained what we'd seen.

The people in the room rushed into action. In addition to the doctor, the nurse, and the operators from Torchlight who had been assigned to an impromptu emergency response team ran off to check on the patients' condition. I heard the sound of the fire door being returned to its normal position echo through the lobby.

"Thank you, both of you," Migiwa said with a polite bow of his head.

"We're fine, but...aren't you in a lot of trouble, Migiwa-san?"

A number of the patients in a facility he managed had just died, after all. I was a little worried how that was going to be handled given how hard it would be to explain it was an attack by T-san.

"I am sorry to have worried you. This is not the first time a patient has passed away, so we will simply inform the bereaved with all due solemnity."

If the money to operate DS Research came from the families of the bereaved, then the death of a patient likely meant a loss of funding. This had to be hurting Migiwa financially too. I still thought it might be my fault that T-san had shown up here, so I couldn't help but feel bad about it.

"This is the second attack here, coming after the one by Runa Urumi. It seems that increased contact with the UBL can lead to situations like this. I was not being cautious enough. While I did enhance our physical and electronic security after the last time, I had never considered countermeasures against this kind of infiltration."

Uh, actually, there was another attack before Runa Urumi's: when Satsuki Uruma's shadow appeared and threw the Kotoribako at us.

The thing is, I never told them what happened then. It had been forgotten with everything that had happened since then, and even after Toriko caught me lying it was still too awkward for me to come clean about it. Toriko probably had it completely figured out, though.

While I was thinking about that, not saying anything, Toriko took over for me. "So, how are you going to handle it? You might be able to handle humans, but there's no way you can handle an inhuman intruder like T-san, right?" she asked.

“That is correct. It would help if we could have you two permanently stationed here, but that is not feasible. I will think of something.”

Migiwa’s tone was plain. It was as hard to read him as ever.

“And the girl? Was she not in there?” Kozakura asked impatiently.

“She wasn’t,” I answered. “Runa Urumi seemed to have seen her, but said she’d vanished.”

“Vanished?”

“She said something about her being there one moment, gone the next. Runa seemed to think she was a Fourth Kind that could go invisible.”

Migiwa nodded, as if satisfied with that explanation. “That is in line with my own impression. The girl disappears sometimes, and then shows back up again, looking like nothing is out of the ordinary, as we are running around trying to find her. It has happened repeatedly. I thought that my eyes were playing tricks on me at first.”

“I’ve thought about that, and...based on how we found her, I don’t think the girl simply becomes invisible. It might be that she’s going into and out of a phase that’s different from the reality we perceive. Whether that’s the Otherside, the interstitial space, or something else, I couldn’t say, though,” I said.

Kozakura clutched her head like she had a headache. “You sure do find all sorts of angles to endanger my sanity, huh...?”

“It’s not my fault, okay?”

“Maybe she’s right here, and I can grab her.” Toriko felt around with her left hand. It’d be hilarious if she found her that way, but she was just scooping air. My right eye wasn’t picking up anything either.

I guess it’s not that easy... I was thinking when Miguiwa looked down at his tablet.

“I’ve found her.”

“Huh?!” Toriko blurted out.

“Where?” I asked.

“In the UBL artifact warehouse. There should be no way for her to enter, but after hearing Kamikoshi-san’s theory just now, I thought that maybe...”

He turned the tablet so we could see the screen, and there, in the dark warehouse, we could see the little girl wandering around aimlessly.

“Is it okay for kids to wander around in there...?”

“It is not desirable, no. I shall go and fetch her.” Migiwa left the meeting room at once.

“Sorawo, did you think of a name?”

“I forgot to.”

“I figured. Should I come up with one after all?”

“No, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Since when did you like kids so much, Sorawo-chan?” Kozakura asked.

“No, I don’t like them at all. Do you, Kozakura-san?”

“I hate them.”

Toriko had a look of disbelief on her face. “There’s people who hate kids?”

“Yeah,” I told her. “It’s pretty normal.”

“Why do you hate them?”

“No reason. But there’s no reason for me to like them either.”

“You’ve never thought you wanted kids, then, Sorawo?”

“Not even once.”

“Oh...” Toriko seemed shocked by my response, and was thinking about something with a serious look on her face. Maybe someone like Toriko who was raised by loving parents never had any doubt that they would build a family and raise children themselves.

Maybe if my family had been normal, I would have felt the same way.

“Why do you hate them, Kozakura-san?” I asked.

“Who knows? But it might just have something to do with a certain pair who are an awful lot like children actively ruining my life.” Smirking when she saw me wince at that, Kozakura continued. “There’s no real reason for it. I didn’t like kids even before you two showed up. They don’t listen, and they’re noisy.”

“How does it make you feel when you look at kids, Kozakura? Aren’t they cute?” Toriko asked.

“I think, ‘Oh, look, a tiny human.’”

“Am I the weird one...?” Toriko started looking troubled, so I decided to say something.

“I don’t think you’re weird at all. It’s just that some people like children, and others don’t. I know I said I hate kids, but I don’t utterly despise them. I’m just not interested.”

“You like cute stuff, so I was sure you’d like kids too, Sorawo.”

There’s a lot Toriko doesn’t get about me, huh...? I was thinking as I responded. “Those are two separate things. If someone likes kids the same way they like cute characters, they’ll probably start abusing them when they stop being cute.”

“Y-You think?”

“Kids are other people, at the end of the day. You know I’m fundamentally uninterested in other people.”

“Uh, yeah... I do.”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Gotcha...”

Migiwa returned with the kid in tow. The image of a man who was clearly not a law-abiding citizen leading a girl who looked like she was in primary school around by the hand felt like it would not be all that well received by anyone who didn’t know the circumstances.



“She was all right?” Kozakura said, relieved. It was kind of weird, given she’d just finished declaring she hated kids. Come to think of it, when I got here, Kozakura was the first one to express concern for the girl.

“I am sorry to have caused a fuss,” Migiwa said, releasing the girl’s hand and closing the door to the meeting room. She took one glance at us, then began pacing the room as if she was uninterested.

Toriko walked into her path, crouched down, and met her at eye level. “Hey, kid, have you been traveling around to all different kinds of worlds on your own?”

The girl looked back at Toriko, but immediately looked away. Then she moved around Toriko and kept on wandering.

Toriko stood up and watched her go. I was surprised to see the gentle smile on her face. She must really think kids are cute...

“It’s a good thing T-san didn’t get her, huh?” Kozakura said.

Toriko nodded. “Do you think T-san came to kill the Fourth Kinds here?” she asked quietly.

“Hrm...” I thought about it. “Well, most of the ones he got are still alive. If he was trying to kill them, he almost totally failed.”

“Maybe he’d have killed them all if Runa wasn’t there?”

Now that was a possibility. I wasn’t ready to admit it, but it was a fact that Runa had saved a number of the patients’ lives.

“I don’t know about killing them... Sealing them, or exorcising them might be more in line with the original net lore,” I said as I thought it over. “Looking at how he’s acted so far, I think that T-san the Templeborn is a being—or a phenomenon, rather, from the Otherside that appears in front of people who have had contact with the Fourth Kind and Hah!-s them.”

“You mean to say that he is not human, then. That T-san is not, himself, a Fourth Kind contactee,” Migiwa commented.

“I think so. What if the ‘Hah!’ itself isn’t lethal, but has the effect of severing a Fourth Kind’s connection to the Otherside...?”

“Is that how he took away the function of your right eye and erased your memories of the other world, Sorawo-chan?” Kozakura asked.

“And why Akari lost her memories when she’s not a Fourth Kind?” Toriko added.

“Yeah. But Akari’s weren’t completely erased. His ‘Hah!’ isn’t like an eraser, it’s more like closing a valve. That’s why Toriko could use her hand on me, and I could use my eye on Akari, to restore the connection.”

“I see. It seems likely that this, um... ‘Hah!’ left our patients in critical condition because their connection to the UBL has advanced to an even deeper level. If they suddenly lost the influence of the UBL after undergoing such dramatic physical transformations, it is not strange at all that they would be unable to survive.”

“But why would he do that? If T-san himself is a product of the Otherside, what is he wandering around severing people’s connection to it for?” Kozakura had the same doubts that I did.

“There are a number of potential theories, but I think he’s the same as the Time-space Man,” I said. “He was also a phenomenon in human form that chased people who wandered into the interstitial space back to the surface world. At a glance, he looks a bit like a guardian of the boundary... In the same way, if we were to assume that T-san is just taking the form of the ‘reliable senpai who was born at a temple and takes out spiritual phenomena,’ that would make sense to me.”

“So then there are not necessarily competing factions in the UBL that are fighting against each other in the surface world?”

“I considered that idea after you mentioned it, Migiwa-san, because it would be a lot easier on us if it was that simple...”

“That’s for sure,” Kozakura said with a pained smile. “T-san’s actions seem to be at odds with the way other phenomena operate, but that’s not it... Does individual humans losing their connections to the Otherside not matter to them? This all hinges on us assuming they have a will at all, though.”

“That may be the case, but...based on past experience, I think that they do

have some kind of will.”

“You think so, Sorawo-chan?” Kozakura asked as if probing me.

“Yes,” I replied. “I mean, they know our names, they try to get us involved with incidents connected to the Otherside, they take us to the Otherside when all we did was get in a taxi, they move into the apartment next to mine, they show up as lion dancers, they know my past, they show me my own mother’s face...!”

“Sorawo.” Toriko placed a gentle hand on my arm, and I realized I’d been raising my voice. Her eyes were concerned. Kozakura was cringing.

“Did I just go crazy...?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s all good.”

“Could you not go insane without warning? It’s scary...” Kozakura protested in a quivering voice, trying to calm herself.

“Sorry... But why did I go crazy now?”

“First time I’ve ever heard someone ask that question,” Kozakura quipped.

“You know, I might kind of understand...” Toriko said, hesitantly raising her hand unexpectedly.

“What might you understand?” I asked.

“I had the same thing happen to me,” she said, adding, “On the beach.”

I saw Toriko shudder as she looked at me.

“Um, try to...remember...the time you...came to get me.” Her wide eyes turned empty. Toriko’s breathing became shallow, and her words were intermittent.

“When I think about ‘them,’ it feels like it’s going to ruin—”

“Toriko!” Instinctively reaching out, I grabbed Toriko’s face between my hands. Her indigo eyes suddenly regained their focus.

“It’s okay. I’m fine. Thanks.”

When I let go, Toriko shook her head back and forth. She swallowed her spit, and tried to steady her breath.

“Here’s how I think it probably is. Something on the other side of the Otherside is making contact with us. When we think too hard about that, our consciousness starts to drift away. So we should try not to think about it normally.”

“That... That was happening to me just now.”

“I’ll bet. It’s like there’s specific points in our memories that are dangerous.”

“I get it...”

Trying to stop my quivering, I turned to face a bewildered Kozakura.
“Remember that conversation we had when you told me about the fear function, Kozakura-san?”

“Yeah... We did talk about that, huh?”

“A dimension that warps the cognition just by being exposed to it, turning absolutely everything into an object of terror. You said the Otherside might be that kind of giant fear function, right? Well, it feels like that function exists inside us too, suddenly driving us crazy if we think about certain things. And the trigger for it is the beings on the other side...”

“I get it. Let’s not talk about this,” Kozakura said, but I shook my head.

“We don’t need to stop. As long as we’re aware of it, we’ll be able to manage somehow.”

“Still...”

“Kozakura, it’s fine,” Toriko insisted. “We may go into a daze once in a while, but we’ll recover in no time.”

“We’re fine up to a certain point. Sometimes, something will touch us the wrong way, though.”

Looking from me, to Toriko, then back again, Kozakura let out an exasperated sigh. I expected a sarcastic comment, but none was forthcoming. “Okay, I’m

going to work under the assumption that those, um, beings on the other side have the intention of contacting humans,” she said, choosing her words carefully and watching us. I nodded for her to continue.

“The Time-space Man and T-san are both part of their approach?”

“That’s what I suspect. Michiko Abarato may have been too. And the thugs at the beach who knew our names. And the person in the apartment next to mine, the one with the wrist made of thin metal plates...”

I kept talking, careful to keep the shudder running up my spine from taking over.

“When we first talked to Abarato in the other world, he said that pseudo-humans were being sent into this world. That might not have been a delusion after all. Of all the various phenomena we’ve encountered, the ones that were human seemed most like they were there to contact us, a sort of—”

“*Interface*,” Kozakura murmured, using an English word, and then the girl spoke.

“Interface.”

I turned to look at her in surprise, and the girl was standing in front of the windows, with the blinds drawn, looking at us.

“Did she just say interface?” Kozakura whispered suspiciously. Toriko cocked her head to the side.

“She was saying the same thing the first time she talked too, right?”

“She was?!” Kozakura exclaimed.

Seeing we didn’t understand what she was so surprised about, the girl explained. “The point where two different regions touch is called an interface, but...”

Looking straight at the girl, Kozakura continued on. “...in English, the word is *interface*.”

“Huh?!”

“Don’t you think this girl understands what we’re saying? She may have been

using a borrowed word, but it feels like she was trying to take part in the conversation unfolding in front of her.”

“Using our words, not her own, in an attempt to communicate...?” I asked.

Toriko walked over and talked to the girl.

“Is that right? Do you understand us?”

The girl started squirming under our gazes, then...

“Ah!” everyone shouted.

The girl vanished like smoke before our very eyes.

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I reflexively focused with my right eye; there was a faint silver shimmer in front of the blinds where the girl had vanished. It was thinning as fast as white breath exhaled on a cold day.

“Grab the spot where she was!” I shouted, and Toriko rushed forward, reaching with her left hand. Her translucent fingers left five trails in the mist, and she grabbed it tight.

“Got her!” Toriko declared, but her expression quickly became more dubious. “No, this isn’t her. What am I holding?”

From the view in my right eye, the space around Toriko’s left hand was pulled tight, like she was clutching at a lace curtain. Toriko’s hand was forcefully keeping it from returning to its original flatness. Through her hand, I could see an intense silver light flashing.

“It looks like you can make a gate! Tear it open!” I shouted.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah!”

Toriko pulled with all her might, and the space tore open like a thin sheet. The silver shine suddenly grew much stronger.

We’ve got a gate, I thought, but only for a brief moment. The tear seemed

unstable, and was rapidly closing up, returning to normal.

“Let’s go after her,” I said and Toriko instantly nodded.

“H-Hey...” Kozakura stammered.

“We’ll be right back!”

Toriko and I held hands and leapt through the impromptu gate. It closed tight behind us, and things suddenly fell silent.

Turning around, we found ourselves back in the meeting room—only now, we were the only ones here. The tables and chairs were arranged a bit weirdly, and there were empty plastic bottles and other kinds of trash on the floor.

“The interstitial space?” I wondered aloud.

“Looks like it,” Toriko agreed.

I opened the blinds and looked outside. It was dark. Go figure... It was night, after all. I could see other lights out there, but we needed to catch that girl before we worried about what was outside.

The door to the meeting room was wide open. We headed out into the hall and could hear the sound of a child’s bare feet on the ground growing more distant as she ran away.

“Hey! Waaait!” Toriko yelled after her. There was no response. “Jeez. She doesn’t need to run.”

“Maybe she got shy when everyone was focused on her,” I suggested.

“I get that,” Toriko said, a hint of nostalgia in her tone. “I was the same way when I was about her age.”

We walked towards the lobby. I had seen a lot of different interstitial spaces, but this one wasn’t so different from the surface world.

When that girl pulled me by the hand and led us back from the depths of the Otherside, I had seen all kinds of strange scenery on the way from the other world to the surface world. Were those interstitial spaces? Or were they other forms of the Otherside, like the beach at the end of the world, the bottom of the Kotoribako, or the town of dusk? I didn’t know exactly, but as we were

walking through them there were a number that seemed almost no different from the surface world. This might be another “shallow” place in the Otherside.

The hall was littered with trash, just like the meeting room. That suddenly started to bug me, so I picked up some of the plastic bottles. A familiar brand of cola, and orange Fanta. The other trash came from candy: an empty box of Pocky and the wrapper for an Ippon Manzoku Bar.

“What do you think?” I showed Toriko the garbage, and she laughed out loud.

“What a brat.”

“She must have snagged this stuff in the surface world and brought it back to the interstitial space.”

“They’re probably snacks that were lying around an office, don’t you think? There’s an ordinary medical facility beneath DS Research, right?”

“This isn’t right. We’ll have to scold her.”

Toriko seemed amused when I said that. “I thought you said you weren’t interested in kids, Sorawo.”

“Mmmm. I’m not.”

“Well, why did you say we should go after her, then?”

“We couldn’t just leave her alone.”

“Hmm?”

My answer apparently wasn’t good enough for Toriko. She seemed mystified. After scratching my head for a while, I finally ended up coming clean. “I felt this same way before...when we first chased her through that town at dusk...”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s weird. It feels like I’m looking at myself. My old self. Even though she’s nothing like me.” I let out an awkward laugh. “Wow, I’m creepy. Projecting myself onto a little girl like that...”

I was trying to play it off as a joke, but Toriko didn’t laugh. “I think I can understand. I figured you were probably like that when you were little too.”

“I wasn’t as much of a wild child as her, though...” I mumbled in protest.

Toriko smiled.

“Isn’t this nice? You were never interested in other people, so it makes me happy to see you thinking about another person like this.”

“You...think so?”

Toriko had a positive interpretation of it, but I wasn’t so sure. If I was projecting myself onto another person and getting obsessed with that, didn’t that mean I was still only interested in myself?

When I saw her for the first time, living alone in such a scary place, I projected myself onto her. But in the time since we’d brought her to DS Research, I had realized that, yes, she did resemble me in some ways.

That included my disinterest in others. And my tendency to move away when they try to get closer to me...

We walked down the hall, keeping an eye on our surroundings as we went. The medical floor of the DS Research building had always felt lonely despite how neat and orderly it was, and here in the interstitial space it felt even more cold and empty. There were doors and shelves missing, and ceilings without light. It was as empty as a building that the tenants had moved out of, and was dirty on top of that.

Because of its size, the lobby felt even more like a ruin than the rest of it. The elevator hall was pitch-dark, and the lights on the elevator were out too. A brick wall from floor to ceiling blocked off the back of the lobby. In the surface world, that whole wall was a thick door, and it hid the stairs to the warehouse where the artifacts were stored. Maybe there was some trick to opening it here too, but I didn’t see how we were going to get through there. My right eye wasn’t showing anything either.

“I thought she’d snuck in there from this side, but I guess not,” I said.

“Think there’s another route?” Toriko asked.

“That, or she moved to another world...”

“That’s probably easier for her.”

“If we don’t catch her quickly, she’ll run off somewhere else again.”

We turned from the lobby to the hallway lined with hospital rooms. There were two blue lines in the floor, extending straight down the hall. The lines were maybe ten centimeters wide and resembled the white lines used to mark the pedestrian walkway alongside a road, but they were parallel and separated by about the width of a person's shoulders.

We followed the lines to the place we had just approached with such deathly caution in the surface world. Even though Runa Urumi and T-san weren't here (they weren't, right?), there was no telling what might be in the interstitial space, so we had to keep our guard up.

"Huh...?" Toriko said, her voice possessing none of the alertness I was just thinking we needed. Her eyes were on the window of the nearest room. In the surface world, it had been the room of one of the patients that T-san got.

Standing next to Toriko, I peered in. Inside the empty room, someone had left a single flower, and a little box in the spot where the patient's body, which seemed to be made of paper, had been blown into a heap by the air conditioner.

The door wasn't locked. We went into the room to take a closer look. It was a box of caramels. It wasn't wrapped, so it had been opened. I opened it up to pull out the box inside and there were only two candies left.

"You think it's an offering...?" Toriko whispered, her voice heavy with emotion.

"To the dead?"

"Doesn't it look that way?"

"You think the girl did this?"

"If she was the one who's been pilfering candy, then it must have been, right?"

I returned the box of caramels to its place, crouching down. "It's hard to get mad at her if she does stuff like this."

The room was empty, but having this offering here made it feel like a grave. Toriko closed her eyes and put her hands together, so I did the same.

“You’re a Buddhist?” I asked.

“Mom was,” Toriko responded, lowering her hands.

“What about Mama...?”

“A conflicted Christian.”

“Hmm?”

“She wanted to believe in God, but couldn’t accept the values of the church.”

“Which are you, Toriko?”

“No one ever told me I had to pick, but I guess I’m closer to Mom. How about you, Sorawo?”

“I don’t have a very good impression of religion.”

“Ohh... Yeah, of course you wouldn’t, huh?”

“Sorry. Don’t worry about it... I’m me. You’re you. You can believe in whatever you want.”

“But you still put your hands together. Isn’t that Buddhist?”

“I think most Japanese people will pray in front of a grave. Even if they’re not consciously religious.”

“Isn’t that religion, though?”

We left the room and returned to the hall.

“Since they call him T-san the Templeborn, the original story must be based in Buddhism or something, right?” Toriko asked.

“Nah, I don’t think it has anything to do with it. He was just born in a temple. He’s not a monk, and the stories never said that he was Buddhist either.”

“Wha?”

“The original stories were meant to be humorous, so maybe there’s no point discussing them seriously like this, but... I think when readers see that he was born in a temple and he shouts ‘Hah!’, they just come up with this image of a young Buddhist monk with great spiritual powers on their own.”

“Hearing that makes it sound a whole lot more dubious all of a sudden.”

“I mean, if anything, it *shouldn't* sound believable. It's a gag, after all...”

We looked through the other rooms as we went, and there were “graves” there too. While I didn't go out of my way to check, they were probably the same rooms as the ones patients died in in the surface world. They each had a flower or two and some misappropriated snacks. Some of which were partially eaten.

“I dunno what that girl's thinking, but she has the heart to do something like this...” Toriko whispered emotionally, then looked at me as if realizing something. “Oh! It's not like I'm saying you're heartless or anything, Sorawo!”

“Thanks. I never would have thought you meant that until you said that just now.”

“S-Sorry.”

“It's fine.”

She must have remembered me getting mad when I was called heartless before. I was grateful for the thought, but she didn't need to say that at all.

“Listen, the reason I said that is...”

“It's fine. I'm not that upset about it.”

“No, listen. I was a little unsure about whether that girl is human or not, so I was relieved to see her acting like one.”

“Ohh... Yeah, I can see why you'd think that.”

Although the girl looked obviously human, we had encountered pseudo-humans on multiple occasions since we got involved with the Otherside. I'd always had a slight suspicion she might be the same sort of entity as T-san or Michiko Abarato.

“I don't know just how human it is to make graves, though,” I said. “I hear there are animals that mourn their dead too. Like elephants.”

“So what I'm hearing is it's possible she could be an elephant...”

Part of the reason we were saying such silly things was that we didn't want the girl to be scared of us when we approached. If we crept up in silence, or ran

around after her, she'd probably flee to another space. At that point, there'd be nothing we could do. That's why I figured that maybe it was best to make our presence known while we approached at a relaxed pace.

If she was as irritable as I used to be, she might think we were annoying and disappear, though...

After poking our heads into a number of rooms, we came across one that was quite different from the others. There was something like a tent against the back wall made from a number of sheets and blankets. It looked like it was supported by a clothing rack. The inside was packed with more blankets, white coats, and patient gowns, creating something like a cave made from a wide variety of fabrics. It even had some cushions, though I had no idea where she'd pinched them from.

Brown eyes stared out from that comfortable darkness.

There she was. The girl.

We stopped at the door.

"Hey there," I tried calling out to her. There was no response.

"Mind if we come in?" I tried again.

Still no response. She just stared back at us in silence. Toriko and I strode into the room as nonchalantly as we could, trying not to agitate her.

There were a number of cut flowers in front of the tent. Some were still full of life, but others were mostly withered. Considering the number she had...did she snag a whole bouquet from the building's reception?

I tried not to get too close, crouching down about two meters away from her. I could tell she was watching us.

"Wow. Did you make this yourself? I love this kind of stuff too. It's fun, isn't it?" I said, looking up at the tent with a smile. It felt kind of weird. It had to be the first time in my life I was talking to a kid so much younger than me. I'd never done it before, so it was strange to see myself doing something that seemed like I was doing it right. Was I pulling it off?

Toriko pointed in front of the tent. "Those flowers sure are pretty, huh? Did

you make those graves for the people back there?” she asked in a gentle tone.

When Toriko pointed from the flowers to the rooms we’d just walked past, the girl blinked. There was a short lapse, and then she spoke. “We’ve lost a lot of men along the way here.”

Toriko gulped for a moment before she continued talking. “You were making offerings to the dead?”

“If we don’t make the attempt to remain civilized, it would be all too easy for us to become animals out here.”

Toriko and I looked at one another. We recognized the words. They seemed too mature for a child...because they were said by one of the soldiers at Kisaragi Station!

“Are we not having a conversation?”

“I think we are...!”

It was like Kozakura said. The girl’s response seemed to show an understanding of what we’d said.

Toriko turned back to the girl. “Hey, let’s go back together. Everyone gets worried when you disappear like this.”

“Yeah, she’s right. There was a scary guy who came through earlier, right? I was so worried when I thought he’d gotten you,” I added.

“Following the tracks,” the girl said.

“The tracks?”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“What’s she talking about?”

“Could she be trying to say that she went through the gate to run away into this interstitial space?” I suggested.

“Maybe?”

Toriko turned back to the girl. “That was dangerous. I’m glad you’re all right. Hey, let’s go home together, okay?”

Toriko offered the girl her hand, but she just stared at it in silence for a while.

As we stood there, waiting, the girl eventually stood up and came out of her tent. When I saw the mountain of candy and sweet drinks piled up in the back of the tent, I had to wonder just how much she'd stolen.

The girl stepped over the line of flowers, her bare feet slapping on the floor. She went right past us as we stood up, relieved, and continued towards the door.

"H-Hey."

"Wait, wait..."

Without so much as a glance back at us as we chased after her, the girl continued even further down the hall. The only thing that way was Runa Urumi's room.

Just as I suspected, that was exactly where she was going. It was as empty as any of the other rooms. We followed her, heading in through the wide open door, then stopped, surprised. There was a man-sized, blue, humanoid figure drawn on the bare concrete wall. It was like a shadow cast by a strong light. The two legs extended from the wall to the floor, connecting to the blue lines that were at our feet.

The girl turned around, looking up at us to say, "Following the tracks."

I looked back outside the door. The two blue lines continued, uninterrupted, from the hall into the room.

"These...are the tracks?" Toriko whispered.

I approached the figure on the wall. The vivid blue stood from its faded surroundings as if it had just been painted there. I was sure I'd get paint on my fingers if I touched it.

Runa Urumi said that T-san vanished when she told him to "go home." Was that it? This figure was left here when he disappeared—and the two lines on the floor were as well?

"You wanted to show us this?" I asked.

The girl looked back at me in silence. Her dark eyes were reflected in my blue

one. What was she thinking? What in the world was this girl...?

As if sensing my doubts, she extended one hand towards me. There was a glowing cube sitting on the palm of her hand.

“A mirror stone...” Toriko said behind me. The artifact that dropped when we defeated a Kunekune. It was a cubic mirror that reflected everything but people. One was lost when Runa Urumi attacked DS Research, and the other was supposed to have been in the warehouse.

In a clear voice, the girl said, “*Interface.*”

Suddenly, the area around us filled with silver mist. My vision blurred, and I reflexively closed my eyes. When they next opened, the scenery in the room had all changed. White painted walls, a simple desk, and Runa Urumi lazing around the bed with a tablet.

“Wha?!” Runa jumped up in bed. For an instant, the shine of the Voice leaked out of her mouth, but it quickly darted back in like an animal after poking its head out of its hole.

“Wh-Where’d you come from?!”

We were back in the surface world. I saw the girl was with us, and was the only one plugging her ears. Snapping back to my senses, I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her close.

“Toriko, open the door!”

Before Runa could recover from her shock, we rushed to the door and escaped.

“Ah! Hey, wai—”

The door shut behind us, cutting Runa off.

The hospital ward in the surface world was noisy with the sound of operators running this way and that. In the middle of all that racket, I let out a sigh of relief like I had just escaped the cage of a wild beast. While we did have Toriko’s hand and my eye to fight back, it would still be dangerous if she attacked with the Voice when we weren’t prepared, like just now.

“H-Hey, I’m really glad you brought us back and all, but I’d have appreciated it

even more if you'd considered where we were going to come out," Toriko said, but the girl just stared back at her, mystified.

"Well, no harm done..." I said, looking back to the hall with a strained smile, and was surprised yet again.

"Huh...? Is this...?"

"What is it?"

"Toriko, are you seeing this?"

"What?"

"Blue lines... Like before."

Toriko followed my line of sight before shaking her head. "I don't see anything."

In my right eye, I saw the two parallel blue lines as if they had been overlaid on top of the scenery in front of me. However, they weren't as distinct as the ones drawn in the interstitial space. These were more of a lingering image, a vague wake of light.

I changed my position, looking through the window into the room we'd just come out of. Behind Runa, who seemed to be protesting in my general direction, there was a vague blue figure of a person stuck to the wall.

Had passing through that interstitial space made it so I could see them? Or, no. Had the girl made it so I could?

When I looked at her, she was munching away at a little packet of chocolate almonds that she had pulled out of who knows where. She didn't eat them all at once, instead taking them in her hands and chomping on them bit by bit like some kind of tiny animal. Honestly, she looked kind of stupid. She sure didn't look like there were any deep thoughts going on inside her little head.

Just how much of this experience, and the resultant change in my perception, had been intentional?

The blue lines continued into the lobby, and beyond.

"Followed the tracks."

If those words weren't just a coincidence, I could guess that these blue lines showed the route T-san took to get to DS Research. Now that I could see them, maybe...I could chase after T-san by following in his wake?

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"You're going after him? You mean T-san?" Kozakura, who was sitting cross-legged in her chair, said dubiously when I returned to the meeting room to explain my plan.

"If we follow the wake I can see, it might lead us to where T-san was, and it might lead us to where he went after all this. Either way, we're guaranteed to get closer to him."

"And then what?"

"We beat him."

That answer earned a frown from Kozakura. "You beat him, huh..."

"If we don't take him down fast, we're in trouble."

"Still, though. When you tailed him with Seto-chan, she was the one who got beat."

"Only because we didn't know what he was. Our mistake was being cautious because we thought he was human."

Migiwa, who had been quiet until this point, interjected. "I believe Kozakura-san's concern is well-founded, but if we simply sit on our hands, I have little doubt the enemy will return to attack us here again. Although it galls me to admit it, at present, we have no means to resist such an assault. Runa Urumi may have repelled him temporarily, but we have no idea just how much of an effect her Voice can have on an Otherworld entity. There is no telling when he may return to—"

"But finding out the Voice works on him was a pretty big deal," Toriko said. "His 'Hah!' is scary, but T-san isn't invincible. My hand and Sorawo's eye should work like normal."

I nodded in agreement. "There's one more thing... I have a reason for wanting

to chase after him.”

“What?” Kozakura asked.

“Runa Urumi said she told him to ‘go home.’ And then he vanished... Basically, if he followed her orders, T-san must have ‘gone home’ to wherever he came from.”

“Uh-huh...? And that’s why it doesn’t matter whether the blue lines show him coming or going?”

“Exactly! We just need to follow them.”

I walked over to the window and rolled up the blinds. The shining blue line snaked through the streets of Tokyo, turning sharply on occasion as it stretched into the distance. It was T-san’s wake, which no one else could see. Buildings quickly hid where it was going, but I could tell it was headed in a generally northerly direction.

The girl, who had been acting disinterested until now, tottered over to rest her chin on the windowsill and stare outside. From behind me, as I stared down at the city and the back of the girl’s head, Kozakura spoke up.

“So. What if you follow that, and it just leads you back to the same apartment? It seems entirely possible, doesn’t it?”

“If that happens...maybe we torch the apartment?”

That was meant as a joke, but Kozakura and Toriko both frowned, so I hurriedly added, “I won’t do that! I was just saying it.”

“When you’re the one saying it, that’s not funny, Sorawo-chan...”

Apparently, my sense of humor really sucked. That was kinda depressing...

“Anyway, I get what you wanted to say. Me worrying may not do a lot of good, but... If you’re going, be careful,” Kozakura said in a resigned tone.

“I know. So... Migiwa-san, I had a favor to ask.”

“What might that be?”

“Could you give us a ride?” I asked. “It looks like it’s going to be a long way... I’m not sure we can catch up on foot.”

Migiwa's brow furrowed with concern. "I wish I could accept immediately, but... It would be a bit difficult for me to leave here right this moment."

"Oh...! Yeah. I guess it would, huh?"

With DS Research right in the middle of a crisis, as the person in charge, Migiwa couldn't just leave. That didn't occur to me until he said so.

"I am sorry that I cannot be of more help."

"No, don't be. In that case..."

I was going to suggest one of the Torchlight operators instead, but... I decided against it. It was the same situation. Right now, they were acting as medics. I couldn't pull them away from here.

Giving up, I looked at Toriko. "Well, how about the two of us go?"

"You want to flag down a taxi?"

"That, or we get bikes..."

"You think there's rental bicycles around here? I'll take a look."

"Could you?"

As we were talking, Kozakura slowly slid out of her seat and stood up. "Oh, screw it... I'll go."

"Huh?"

"Kozakura? You?"

"Can we borrow the car?" Kozakura asked Migiwa.

"Of course. Please, use it as you see fit."

Despite his absurdly polite tone, the way Migiwa chucked her the keys was haphazard. Kozakura caught them and started walking. "What're you two standing around for? We're going."

"Huh? O-Okay."

Snapping back to our senses, Toriko and I grabbed our stuff and chased after her. I just had my usual tote bag, but Toriko's backpack had exploration gear and a disassembled rifle in it, so it clattered as she ran. Kozakura strode boldly

across the lobby, pressing the down button for the elevator.

“Why the sudden change of heart, Kozakura?” Toriko asked.

“Because when I imagined the two of you wheezing as you pedaled a couple of bikes, it was just pathetic. And I wouldn’t feel right getting an innocent taxi driver caught up in this.”

“Aren’t you scared?” I asked. “Normally you...”

“Of course I’m scared. Don’t make me kill you.”

“Wha...?”

Seeing as we didn’t get it, Kozakura sighed. “The truth is, I don’t want to do this at all. I want to go home, eat dinner, and pass out.”

“Right...” I agreed.

“So, why then?” Toriko asked.

“Maybe I’ll tell you, since you’ll never figure it out otherwise. I try to act like a responsible adult in front of you two!”

“You do?” Toriko asked.

“Uh... Sorry,” I apologized.

Kozakura let out another sigh as if trying to calm herself. “No... It’s nothing you need to apologize for. I just do it because I think I should. It wasn’t right for me to get snappy at you over it.”

As we were staying quiet, not sure how we should respond, Kozakura spoke up again. “I pushed you to try and do something about what happened to you, so I couldn’t just be like, ‘Good luck with that,’ and leave you on your own afterwards. I never want to go to the other world again, but so long as we stay on this side, I can deal with it somehow. T-san seems less bad than the usual ghost stories anyway.”

“Kozakura...” Toriko said.

“Thank...you...” I chimed in.

Kozakura snorted. “You two’ll do the same thing for other people. I’m not one for grand statements, but that’s probably the way this world is set up.”

The elevator arrived, and the door opened. I heard footsteps behind us as we got in, and turned to see Migiwa had followed us.

“I will see you off downstairs.”

“Sorry for the trouble when you’re so busy,” I replied.

“By yourself? Did you leave the girl behind?” Toriko asked.

“She vanished again,” Migiwa said simply.

“Again?!” Kozakura exclaimed.

“In her own way, much like T-san, that girl is too much for ordinary people to handle... From what the two of you have told us, she has built herself a safe hideaway, so I have decided not to make too much of a fuss when she disappears,” Migiwa explained.

“And how about the fact that she can go in and out of the warehouse freely?” I asked.

“That is our greatest concern at the moment.”

“That kid will probably steal anything she wants. She doesn’t seem to have any concept of ownership,” I said.

“And she seemed to be able to get into and out of locked rooms through the interstitial space,” Toriko added.

“There is a need to verify our system for storing medicine and guns, but I am sure that will not solve the fundamental problem. It would seem we should consider storing things in a safer place.”

The elevator came to a stop and we stepped out into the underground parking lot. As Migiwa looked around the area, I did the same with my right eye.

“Is T-san’s trail here too?” Toriko asked.

“You stepped on it just now,” I told her.

“Huh? No way!” Toriko jumped back. She took off her glove and cautiously touched the spot where she had just been standing.

“You’re right... It feels cold.”

“Oh, you can tell.”

“Apparently. It feels like running water.”

As Kozakura crossed the parking lot with broad steps, I heard the door up ahead of us unlock despite her not seeming to have done anything. I remembered hearing before that if you just had the key, the door would unlock on its own. I was going to chase after her, but Kozakura raised her hand. “Stay there. I’ll bring the car around.”

When you put it next to someone of Kozakura’s height, the black luxury car looked even bigger than it actually was. It was the DS Research company vehicle, and Migiwa used it like his own property. A Mercedes S-Class...I think? When you call it a Benz, I think, *Oh, someone’s doing well for themselves*, but if you call it a Mercedes, then it starts to feel like a real luxury vehicle. That’s about how much I knew about cars.

Kozakura sat in the driver’s seat, moved it all the way forward, and closed the door. The engine started, the lights turned on, and the car headed towards us.

That’s when Migiwa turned to look at something. Caught off guard by the sudden movement, I looked too. I spotted a human figure darting behind one of the concrete pillars that held up the roof to the parking lot.

There was a metallic snap in Migiwa’s hand, and his collapsible police baton appeared.

Is it T-san? Migiwa strode towards the figure, keeping the baton hidden by his own body. I dashed across the parking lot to get to a position where I would be able to see behind the pillar too. If I didn’t watch with my right eye, Migiwa’s attacks wouldn’t connect.

“Whoa, what?! What’s your problem?!”

The person there panicked as Migiwa approached with a grim look on his face. Surprisingly, it was a female voice. A familiar one, at that.

When I saw who it was, I shouted. “Stop, Migiwa-san! She’s not an enemy!”

Migiwa came to a halt, glancing in my direction. “Is this an acquaintance of yours?”

Toriko caught up, toting her Makarov, and stood beside me.

“Akari...?” she said, sounding surprised. “What are you doing here?”

The one hiding behind the pillar had been Akari Seto. Despite crying out in surprise, she was standing on her tiptoes, left foot in front of her. Even as an amateur, it looked like a karate-style pose to me. When she looked at me and Toriko, there was a look of relief, followed by awkwardness.

“Uh... Hey there, Senpai.”

“What’re you doing here?” I asked.

“Oh! Um, I wonder about that. Ah ha ha.”

Toriko suddenly snapped to her senses and lowered her gun. The police baton had vanished from Migiwa’s hands at some point too. We may have narrowly avoided seeing the battle of karate vs. collapsible baton.

When I narrowed my eyes at her, Akari looked up and to the left.

“So, Akari...”

“Y-Yes?”

“Did you tail me here, perchance?”

Akari then started acting really suspicious. She inhaled sharply, her lips mouthing words, and she started saying stuff like, “Oh, no, not at all,” with none of her usual directness. I glared at her.

“Hey.”

“Urkh...”

Perhaps concluding that she couldn’t lie her way out of this, Akari suddenly faced me straight on, and bowed her head. “I’m sorry! I was tailing you!”

I knew it...!

“I was about to head home from the university when I saw you racing for the bus, phone in hand, looking like you were in a real hurry. I figured you had to be up to something with Nishina-senpai again, and I couldn’t help myself. You didn’t notice when I got on the bus behind you, so I followed you all the way here!”

It was a clear confession spoken in a loud voice. I knew she'd been interested in what Toriko and I were doing for a long time, so it was easy to believe her. Now that I had some underpinning for the vague suspicions I'd been harboring for some time, a lot of things fell into place for me.

I had first sensed something was off when she showed up at Kozakura's mansion during the Sannukikano incident. Akari insisted I'd mentioned an acquaintance who lived in Shakujii-kouen, but no matter how careless I'd been while talking to her, I couldn't believe I would ever have let that information slip. It had been bugging me ever since.

I had thought, half-jokingly, that Akari was kinda stalkerish towards me, but apparently she really was. Scary... Is it normal to tail people like that...?

Huh? Hold on...

Having thought through it that far, I realized something.

Looking back, Toriko first visited my university under similar circumstances. She'd hunted me down only knowing the name of the place. Come to think of it, I'd just returned the favor by finding her at her university too. We may not have tailed each other, but from an objective perspective, maybe it was all sort of the same. Which meant...all three of the women here had experience in stalking? What's with that?

Maybe it was pretty normal after all...

"S-Senpai...?" Akari looked at me, an uneasy expression on her face as she tried to gauge my reaction.

Kozakura drove the Benz up alongside us, and stopped.

"What's up? Is something wrong?" Kozakura opened the window to ask.
"Huh? It's Seto-chan."

"Oh! Kozakura-san, hello again."

"What're you doing here?"

"She tailed Sorawo here," Toriko answered, and Kozakura let out an exasperated laugh.

"You were followed by Seto-chan instead of T-san... Heh heh, I never thought

I'd get to use a line like, 'Were you followed here?' in real life," she said, leaning back in her seat with a goofy look on her face. "So, what do you want to do? Do we call it off for today? Speaking from experience, plans that start to fall apart from the very beginning almost never go well."

I had been thinking, but when she asked me that, I looked up. "No. We continue. Let's keep following the plan."

"Then may I assume this young lady will be leaving?" Migiwa asked, but I shook my head.

"We'll have Akari come with us."

"Huh? Sorawo—you're sure about that?"

Everyone, including Akari herself, looked surprised by my decision.

"She's already come this far, so let's have her lend us a hand."

"C-Can I, Senpai?!"

"In exchange, I'm going to be putting you to work, though."

"O-Okay!"

"Hmm...?" Kozakura cocked her head to the side as she opened the car doors. "Well, I'd be driving Seto-chan and Sorawo-chan off in the same direction either way. If you're fine with what you've decided, then everyone pile on in."

I was about to get into the back seat when Kozakura stopped me. "You're in the navigator's seat, Sorawo-chan. How else are you going to guide me?"

"Oh, right." I took my seat next to Kozakura while Toriko and Akari got into the back and closed the car doors.

"Please take care."

With Migiwa seeing us off, the car smoothly glided into motion. We raced up the ramp out of the underground parking garage and onto the street.

"Which way?"

"Right."

"Um... You're not mad?" Akari asked from the back seat, sounding uneasy.

“Hmm, I dunno.”

“You don’t know...?”

I was irritated at her for silently tailing me, of course. But if you think about it, maybe I wasn’t in any position to talk. And when I thought that, there was one other thing that started to concern me. Maybe Akari didn’t have quite so many screws loose when I first met her. It could be that all the times I’d looked at her with my right eye had messed her up...

If that was true, the “stalkerishness” I had sensed from Akari might not have been something she already had, but an attribute I’d added to her myself after the fact. Once I started thinking that, it seemed more and more likely.

“S-Senpai, um, I’m really sorry. It’s okay to get mad at me, you know?!”

It seemed my silence had unnerved her even more.

“Nah, I’m really not that mad... What are you so afraid of?”

“I have no idea what you’re thinking and it scares me!”

She tails me on her own, then gets scared on her own. Seriously, what...?

“Don’t sweat it. I was just thinking about stuff. Oh, take that left there.”

“Try to tell me as early as you can. If we miss a turn, it can take a long time to work our way back around if there’s a one-way street,” Kozakura said.

“Gotcha.”

In the back seat, Toriko tried talking to the frightened Akari. “It’s all good. Sorawo’s not the type to be bothered by things like that.”

Huh? Uh, no. That’s not really true...?

“You mean it?” Akari asked.

“Yeah, Sorawo’s just not that interested in other people.”

“I kinda got that impression, yeah.”

“Seto-chan, I know you must be interested, but I never pegged you as the type to stalk someone. You surprised me,” Kozakura said.

“S-Sorry. I’ve never done this kind of thing before, though. But Kamikoshi-

senpai will never tell me what she's doing, so I just couldn't help myself..."

"Listen, Akari, what we're doing is pretty dangerous... You know we carry guns, don't you?"

"She's right, Seto-chan. I know Sorawo-chan was just talking about having you help, but it's okay if you just want to go home instead. We need you to keep quiet about the guns, but you haven't told anyone so far, so—"

"I haven't breathed a word! Also, it's true I was interested in what you all were up to, but Kamikoshi-senpai has been acting weird lately, and I was worried... If it'll help you out, I'll do anything!"

Whenever I got distracted, the two blue lines stretching out in front of the car vanished in an instant. Having to focus to use the power of my right eye was reassuring in a way, but also inconvenient in situations like this where I needed to use it continuously. Seeing where the wake was going took an awful lot of concentration, so I didn't have the chance to quip at everything the other three were saying. When the wake took a long straight course, I finally butted into the conversation.

"Hold on. I was just thinking... Since when were you two so close to Akari?"

"After what we went through together, I'd feel closer to anyone," Kozakura said.

"What you went through?" I asked.

"We were all members of the naked dance friend group."

"K-Kozakura!" Toriko hurriedly tried to stop her, but Kozakura ignored her and continued.

"How has Ichikawa-san been since then? Good?"

"Oh, she was saying she'd like to go out and eat with you again sometime!"

"You mean it? You don't have to try and spare my feelings." Kozakura said. "There's a pretty big age gap, so we don't have a lot in common to talk about..."

"Oh, not at all! Nattsun is super shy around people, so it's rare for her to say something like that. You two must have been on the same wavelength or something."

“Um...”

“Which way, Sorawo-chan?”

“Straight ahead! Um, what’s this friend group you mentioned?”

“The group of four women who put their heads in a circle over your naked, snoring body as we tried to figure out what the hell just happened.”

“Is that right, Toriko...?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“So that’s what happened?”

“It was just the one time...”

“Don’t worry about it. We just talked for a while while you were out cold, Sorawo-chan.”

“About what?”

“Nothing, really...” Kozakura said. “We had sort of gathered without really knowing each other, so we talked a bit about ourselves, and how we got to know you... Thinking back, that might have been the most girls’ party-y thing we did that night.”

“And at the time, I was...”

“Passed out.”

Why did it have to be like this? I was feeling kind of sad now.

Here I was, shocked, as I drove with this friend group through the city center at night. T-san apparently didn’t take the expressway. And there was no sign of him heading to a station, so he didn’t use the trains either. If he’d traced my usual route to the DS Research building, his wake would have headed right for the subway, so that was a bit of a relief.

So was Migiwa really the vector that led T-san to DS Research...? I thought, but the blue wake occasionally went off the road, following a mysterious route that cut through buildings and across train tracks. Unless Migiwa’s car had some secret functions that let it fly through midair, and destroy any walls in its path, there was no way it had followed that path.

It might be that it wasn't Migiwa's or my fault. If I took T-san's line in the cafeteria about, "But it looks like I've caught some awfully small fish" at face value, I had to assume it was about catching DS Research with himself as bait, but that was probably just another line pulled from a T-san the Templeborn story. I think there was one about going night fishing, having a scary experience, and being saved by T-san. In which case, he may have simply selected words close to that.

"Hm? The GPS is weird," Kozakura's grumbling snapped me back to my senses. I looked from the road down to the dashboard. This car had a stupidly large LCD display with a map displayed on it, and it was warped and distorted by static now. The place names and buildings were ones I'd never heard of too. Jyasaugaoka, Faith Station, Oozeichuu Middle School, Magayoji Temple...

I quickly looked outside. Although it was late at night, until just a moment ago, the street had been brightly lit and there had been a fair amount of traffic. Now the road was dark with few streetlights, and we couldn't see any other cars. The view out the window was weird too. First, I saw some weird high-rise buildings with multiple tiled roofs, and then before I knew it we were in the middle of a series of factories with puffing smoke stacks that would never be allowed in the urban area. Next was a school, its grounds lit with red emergency lights and the students lined up with their backs to us, followed by a station with just one streetcar that was covered in acorn barnacles stopped at it. The bizarre scenes passed by one after another.

"Looks like we've entered the interstitial space..." I said, and then the GPS we hadn't entered anything into started speaking.

"Now arriving at..."

"What'd you say?" I asked despite myself.

"...has not been set."

Kozakura sure is quiet, considering the situation, I thought, looking towards the driver's seat. Kozakura was gripping the wheel, eyes straight ahead.

"Sorawo-chan..." she said in a quiet voice.

"Y-Yes?"

“Sorry if I pass out.”

“Kozakura-san?!”

“Listen. I was prepared. Even for this sort of situation. I knew what I was getting into, being with you two. And going after T-san. I was sticking my own neck out, after all.” The way Kozakura was speaking was robotic.

“K-Kozakura, be strong...” Toriko said, putting her hand on Kozakura’s shoulder from the back seat.

In between deep breaths, Kozakura said, “It’s okay. For as long as my hands are on this steering wheel, I’m psyched up to the point where I can take it. But I don’t think I can handle anything beyond driving now. I may never be able to stop again.”

“Um, we’ll be protecting you, Kozakura-san, so...”

“Will you, really? I haven’t forgotten how you abandoned me in that field of flowers, Sorawo-chan. Just shut up and navigate. I’ll drive wherever you tell me to...”

“R-Right.”



In the back seat, Toriko opened her backpack and started assembling the AK. The car lights weren't on, but that didn't seem to be causing her much trouble. Come to think of it, she'd bragged about being able to disassemble and clean it in the dark before. Akari's eyes were wide. She'd only seen the Makarovs before now, so...yeah, of course she'd be shocked to see a big heavy gun like that.

"Akari, I forget, how good are you with scary stuff?" Toriko asked while she worked.

"Huh? I dunno. I wonder."

Toriko laughed at the off-kilter response. "If that's your reaction, I'd say you're good."

You know, she might be even better suited to this than me or Toriko. Was it because she did karate...? I could see why Satsuki Uruma had had her eyes on her.

I decided to set aside my concern for others for a moment and focus on what was in front of me. We had entered the interstitial space, so there was no clue whatsoever as to where we were driving now. T-san's wake had stopped taking bizarre turns and now followed the road on what looked like a set course. In fact, it might've been that the roads were following in his wake.

It got darker and darker around us. The changing bizarre scenery vanished, leaving only the night road that stretched on seemingly forever. It was a wide road, with multiple lanes, and streetlamps at fixed intervals cast a yellow light down on it. I couldn't see any buildings at all, so it felt more like a country road than one in the middle of Tokyo.

The blue wake just continued endlessly along that road—or so I thought, but only for a short time.

"Huh?!" Kozakura cried out, leaning forward. "There's...something there."

I could see another car on the road ahead of us. It was in the same lane as us. We must have been going faster, because the gap was gradually closing. Any car we were running into on a road like this couldn't be normal. We all held our breaths as we watched the details of the car come into view. It was a pitch-

black luxury car.

“Doesn’t it look kind of like ours...?” Akari mumbled.

“It’s a Benz too,” Kozakura replied. “Wait, isn’t it the exact same as us?”

In addition to the type of car, I noticed one more thing. The car up ahead was leaving T-san’s wake behind it. The blue lines that had originally been shoulder width apart had spread out to the width of a car at some point. In other words, the wake we were chasing was being left by that car’s tires.

“That’s it! It’s that car we’re after.”

“Huh? What?”

“T-san’s wake is coming from that car!”

Kozakura was silent for a few seconds. “What do you want me to do about it?! Get in front of him and cause a crash?!” she shouted.

“Do you want to wait for him to stop at a traffic light?”

“Where are there even traffic lights?!”

I was as much at a loss for what to do as she was. I hadn’t anticipated this situation. Did this mean T-san was in that car? On closer inspection, it seemed like there were a number of people riding inside it...

As we drove, we caught up to the car ahead of us. Kozakura changed lanes, and the two cars were driving side by side. We looked at the car beside us—and were shocked.

“I-I’m in there?!” Akari shouted.

It wasn’t just the type of car that was the same as ours. The people riding inside were the same too. Kozakura in the driver’s seat, me in the navigator’s seat, and Toriko and Akari in the back seat. Everyone was there. However, unlike in our car, where everyone was flipping out, the four in that one were all very quiet, sitting with their faces straight forward. They didn’t even look our way. I had seen my own doppelgänger a number of times before, but for some reason it was more scary and discomforting to see my look-alike with other people.

We all seemed to be in a trance as the two cars continued to drive alongside one another for a time. We couldn't overtake them, so there was nothing else to do.

How many rings of light cast by streetlamps did we pass through? I could see something else up ahead. This time, it was a human figure. A woman in a red dress was walking along the side of the road.

"There's no way I'm stopping for her, okay?" Kozakura muttered through clenched teeth. The car sped past the woman without even slowing down.

"What was that, just now?" Akari asked as she turned to look back. She seemed creeped out. No one had any answers for her.

There was another human figure ahead of us. This one was a woman too. Even though she was far away, in the brief moment I caught a glimpse of her illuminated by the streetlight, I could tell her face had been badly gouged. The woman with the gouged face ran out into the road. *We're gonna run her over...* I thought, but I was wrong. It wasn't our car she was heading for. It was the other car, beside ours, with our doubles riding in it.

"Uh-oh..."

"Not good!"

"No way."

"Seriously?"

We all raised our voices at the same time. The woman with the gouged face had tried to jump on top of the Benz beside us. We all saw that, and sensed things were going to turn out very bad if she did. We didn't talk about it, didn't discuss it, just knew it instantly. It was the same sense of crisis you might feel if you saw a toxic snake about to sink its fangs into a kitten.

"Sorawo!" Toriko shouted, opening the back window.

"I'm looking!" I yelled back as the wind whipped through the car. Toriko leaned out the open window and opened fire with the AK. Hitting a moving target from a vehicle in motion should have been ridiculously hard, but Toriko did it. The woman in my right field of vision wrenched with the impact of the

bullet and was thrown to the pavement with all the inertia of the speed she'd been running. The car bumped up and down as it ran over her. Toriko plopped herself back down in her seat, letting out the breath she'd been holding.

"That was dangerous...!" she muttered, her tone full of emotion.

This situation had been more violent than anything I'd ever experienced before, and yet I only felt a sense of relief. I think the others were the same way too. It was like we'd overcome an incredible crisis. I felt the atmosphere inside the car relax.

"We can rest easy now," said the person between Toriko and Akari in the back seat.

He had droopy eyes, thick eyebrows, and a feminine face. The hairband on his forehead held back his long hair like a nun's habit. He had rosary beads in his hands, like some sort of trademark. There he was, T-san the Templeborn, who initially surprised me with how different he was from the way I imagined him.

There was a pregnant pause, and then, as the first to regain my senses, I shouted desperately. "Akari, clobber him!!!"

Akari sat up straight, and almost reflexively, swung her fist towards T-san's face. Catching her fist in his palm, T-san opened his mouth.

"Hah!!!"

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"Ah...!"

When I regained consciousness I was surprised by how bright it was around me.

Looking up, there was a vague white shimmering on the other side of the windshield. It was like we were in the middle of a thick fog. Was there an artificial light in the mist, or had another sun risen? It felt like the fog itself was glowing slightly. It was more than enough light to see by, and I could easily make out what was happening inside the car—even though we'd been driving at night until just now.

It was quiet. The sounds of the car driving had vanished. I didn't feel any pain, so it wasn't like we'd gotten in a crash.

Kozakura was unconscious in the driver's seat, slumped forward as far as the seat belt would let her. In the back seat, Toriko and Akari were out cold too, their heads leaned back against their headrests. There was no one in between them.

"Kozakura-san! Toriko...Akari, wake up!" I called their names, punched them in the arms, and had them conscious again in no time.

"What...happened?" Kozakura said, groaning.

"Thank goodness. You're all okay? No injuries, and your memories are all intact?"

"He was here just now, right? Why—" Toriko started to say, then Akari interrupted.

"It was him, wasn't it? The guy I tailed with you, Senpai. Um..."

It took a while before the three of them settled down. No one seemed to have anything wrong with them physically, which was a relief. The only thing abnormal here was the situation we found ourselves in.

Kozakura had been trying to start the car ever since she woke up. She wasn't having any success. Giving up, she slumped forward in her seat. "The car's stopped."

"Kozakura-san."

"Looks like this is the end of the line for me."

Her eyes were hollow. I slapped her cheeks out of concern, but she shook her head angrily and brushed my hands away. "Stop it..."

"What's going on out there? I can't see a thing," Akari said, pressing herself up against the window. Toriko was looking out the window on the other side of the car too.

"Did that 'Hah!' do this to us?"

"I guess?"

“You said his ‘Hah!’ severs connections to the Otherside, right?”

“That’s what I thought...”

If my hypothesis was correct, when he Hah!-ed all of us, we should have been expelled from the interstitial space. Wherever we were now, it didn’t seem like it was the surface world. Either another interstitial space, or somewhere unfamiliar in the other world...

I took off my seat belt. Kozakura’s eyes went wide. “Hey, what’re you planning on doing?”

“I’m gonna go take a quick look.”

“You’re going outside?! Stop it!”

“We don’t know what’s going on... I tried looking with my right eye, but the whole area is shining silver.”

This could’ve been similar to the indistinct space we passed through on our way back from the evening town. But visibility was even worse than then. It felt like the physical mist and silver mist were overlaid on top of each other.

Opening the door, I went to check what I was about to step out onto...and couldn’t. I couldn’t even see the ground, even though it should have been mere tens of centimeters below. Scary. That gave me some pause, of course, and I leaned out with my hand still on the door. Looking with both my eyes, I saw the tires—slowly spinning.

“Huh...?!” I hurriedly pulled myself back in and closed the door, refastening my seat belt.

“Kozakura-san. The car... It’s moving.”

“Huh?! ”

“The tires are spinning! Slowly, but they still are!”

“You’re kidding me?! ”

Kozakura hastily opened the driver’s side window and poked her head out; she’d been totally against looking outside until just now. Having her hands on the wheel apparently helped her to steel herself, so maybe the sense of danger

that she had as a driver had overcome her terror for the moment.

“Whoa! You were serious!”

Kozakura pulled the hand brake and stepped on the foot brake before leaning out the window again.

“Why?! It’s not stopping!”

Looking out the front window as Kozakura panicked, I saw the mist clearing up ahead. Through it, I saw two blue lines...

“Huh? What’s that?”

“A road...I guess? But it doesn’t look like one...”

Toriko and Akari’s voices rose with surprise. Did that mean the others could see it too?

Examining it again, I realized that these blue lines had physical form. Blue paint, peeling off a metal surface that was dark and lustrous. Our tires ran over the blue lines, rolling forward at a slow pace. Like a train on rails.

“Wh-What’s going on here?” Kozakura stuck her head out the window again, then, in surprise, cried out, “That’s high!”

“High?”

“The car’s floating!”

With the fog finally clearing, I was able to figure out the situation. The blue rails were running through midair. They ran straight forward, supported by a framework of steel beams and pillars that had been painted the same color. Mist shrouded the bottoms of the pillars, and I couldn’t see the ground. I shuddered as I remembered I had been just about to step out of the vehicle.

The rails above the mist continued a long way, and off in the distance were sudden curves to the left and right, as well as intense rises and falls. I could see a lower course painted in red, one that twisted to go upside down, and others that we weren’t on.

“Mind if I say what I’m thinking?” Toriko said quietly as she looked out the window.

“What...?” I asked, a stiff smile on my face, and Toriko turned to look at me.

“This is a roller coaster, isn’t it?”

Based on their expressions, everyone had been thinking the same thing.

We all turned as one to look in front of us. Ten meters ahead, we saw the track make a steep descent.

I found out that when things get real bad, everyone’s silent.

Kozakura pumped the brakes. Repeatedly. Forcefully.

The car did not slow. Moved by some mysterious force, the Benz moved steadily forward, like we were drifting down a river towards a waterfall.

“Everyone’s buckled up...? Right?” Kozakura checked as the car reached the end of the rails’ straight run.

There was a momentary pause, and then the previously horizontal body of the car suddenly tilted, and we fell straight down.

“Wahhhhhhhhhh!!!”

Everyone was screaming. It felt like the car was completely vertical as it fell, the momentum carrying it up and down again, tilting diagonally as it turned. We were at the mercy of the rails that carried us in every direction imaginable. It was even more terrifying when you considered that the tires might come off the tracks at any moment and send us airborne. I couldn’t help but shut my eyes tight any time I saw an especially nasty curve up ahead.

Those few minutes seemed to last an eternity before the rails went straight again. Our pace gradually slackened. Had we made it...?

My body was tense with stress. I looked out the window, trying to regain control of myself. Surprisingly, I could see the ground now. There were green trees on either side of the rails, and streetlamps and benches a few meters beneath them.

“Th-This is an amusement park, right?”

“It really was a roller coaster...”

The two in the back seat mumbled to themselves, seeming a little out of it.

“I know I speculated that entities from the Otherside are trying to scare humans, and this was really, really scary, but...” Kozakura said between gasping breaths as she collapsed on the steering wheel. “This just doesn’t feel like how they’re supposed to do it, right, Sorawo-chan?!”

“Don’t ask me!”

The car was carried along the rails at a gentle pace. I think roller coasters generally have some sort of station building they stop at, but I couldn’t see any destination like that up ahead.

“Where does this end?” Toriko asked.

“I’m....not seeing an end point,” Akari said.

“Don’t tell me we’re going for another loop?” Kozakura said.

We were all getting uneasy as we looked out at the amusement park spread out before us.

“What’s that thing that looks like a ridiculously big swing?” Toriko asked.

“That’s the Flying Pirates,” Akari explained. “You ride in the ship while it spins you round and round.”

“Sorawo, look, a merry-go-round,” Toriko said, pointing.

“Do you like them?” I asked.

“This place looks like a dump,” Kozakura muttered. “Is it abandoned?”

“What’s that mountain of pipes over there?” Toriko asked.

“I think it’s a slide for a pool,” Akari suggested.

“You mean a water slide?”

“Something like that.”

I looked ahead of us again and saw something unsettling.

“Kozakura, up ahead...”

“Now what...?” Kozakura turned to look, then stiffened.

The rails we were riding went into a building up ahead.

It was a Japanese-style structure, with a triangular roof reminiscent of an old temple. The sun-bleached sign had a picture of a traditional ghost with disheveled hair and arms hanging limply, as well as pictures of disembodied souls drawn on it. Next to the dark entrance that seemed to swallow up the rails there was a porcelain statue of a scary-looking tanuki with its eyes and mouth wide open.

It was obviously a haunted house.

“Looks like we have some more traditional scares coming our way...” I said, and Kozakura went from being frozen stiff to clutching her head.

“From a roller coaster straight into a haunted house! What is this, a deluxe set of horrors?! It just merges into anything! This isn’t the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line, damn it!” Kozakura snapped, using a comparison I didn’t really understand, as the car carried us into the haunted house with no way for us to resist.

Inside the dark building, a green light seemed to come from nowhere in particular. The place was probably modeled on a Japanese house with rows of tatami rooms on either side of the rails.

“Kozakura-san, if you can’t take it, it’s okay to close your eyes,” I told her. But as I turned to look beside me, I found Kozakura was already covering her face with her hands.

The car continued unbidden along a course of creepily decorated rooms. There were walls with human-like stains, fusuma panels with ghosts drawn on them, broken shoji screens, a noose hanging from a lintel, and bloodstains on the tatami.

“Kozakura’s right. A roller coaster and a haunted house? What are they trying to do here?” Toriko said as she gazed out the window, holding the AK close to her chest. I pulled the Makarov out of my tote bag.

“They may be probing us, trying to see what we’ll be afraid of. If so, it’s actually weird that a haunted house didn’t show up sooner.”

Toriko shuddered. “It feels awful, having them probing our responses while we can’t do anything in response...”

“Um, what are you talking about?” Akari asked, mystified. I didn’t even know

where to begin.

“There’s apparently some guys in this world that are trying to scare us. We think this situation we’re in right now may be part of that.”

“There’s spooks like that, huh?”

“Spooks... Well, I guess you could call them that.”

“Was it the same with the Ninja Cats and Sannukikano? Were they attacking us to try and scare us?”

“There was more actual damage in those cases, but I think it all came from the same place.”

“So, we’ve just gotta find and take down whoever their boss is, right?”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“You think we can take him down...?” she wondered aloud.

“I dunno...”

“Do guns not work on them?” Akari asked.

“They do on the ones that show themselves in front of us. If Sorawo’s looking.”

“Well, I guess my karate should work too then.”

“If I’m looking...”

I don’t know what it was about that response that she misunderstood, but Akari’s eyes sparkled. “Got it! Please look at me!”

There was some fundamental disconnect between us, but if I was going to try to get us on the same page, that would require going back and explaining everything from the beginning, and that would be a real hassle. I wondered if this was going to be all right, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d given her a lot of information already. Not long ago, I think I would have just told her it was none of her business.

Still, if they were trying to scare us with a haunted house, it was disappointing so far. Sure, the decorations were creepy and all, but that was it. Nothing seemed to be jumping out at us.

As I was thinking that, the rails came to a sudden end up ahead.

“Huh...? Is this it?” I wondered aloud, and then the car quietly came to a stop. It was silent in the darkness.

“Is it over...?” Kozakura asked, still covering her face.

“Does the engine start?” I asked.

Kozakura reached out with one hand and turned the key in the ignition.

“It doesn’t.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“What’s going on now?”

“I’ve got bad news for you, but...”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“...it looks like we’re going to have to walk out of here.”

“I don’t want to hear it!!!”

I turned to look behind me, and Toriko and I nodded to each other.

I unlocked and opened the door on the navigator’s side. There was no movement outside, so I stepped out onto the tatami in my shoes. Toriko got out with me.

The car was stopped in an eight-mat tatami room. On the wall in front of us was a Buddhist altar with the doors shut, and portraits of the deceased lined three of the four walls. Turning to look behind us, the rails that led us here vanished off into the darkness. It had been a straight course all the way here, and yet I couldn’t see the door that led back outside. Worse yet, I couldn’t even see the rooms we had spotted just moments ago. I shone my flashlight in that direction, but it was swallowed up by the darkness.

Toriko turned on the light attached under the barrel of her AK. It was an accessory she’d ordered. The light was small but powerful, and reassuring to have in this darkness.

Akari stepped out of the car, checking the ground around her feet. That left

just Kozakura inside the vehicle. Toriko opened the driver's side door and tried talking to her.

"Kozakura."

"I don't want to get out."

"You want to stay here? Isn't that even more scary?"

"Nothing's come out yet."

"Yeah. *Yet.*"

When Toriko managed to get Kozakura out of the car, she had her hackles raised like a cat that had been tricked into coming to the vet. She was squinting, or rather her eyes were practically closed as Toriko led her by the arm to where I was and then she grabbed my back with both hands. She planned to use me as a blindfold and shield.

"You're making it hard to walk, you know..."

"Deal with it!!!" Kozakura blew up at me when I complained. This was hopeless.

"You stay with Kozakura, Sorawo. I'll stand in front."

"Okay. I'll be behind you, watching."

"Senpai, I'm here too! You can count on me!"

"Yeah, sure, that's great. But what are we going to do?"

"I guess...we could start with this," Toriko said, turning her light towards the Buddhist altar. It was 180 centimeters tall, and about a meter across, with a roughly twenty centimeter step connected to the ground, above which was a closed set of double doors. This was the only thing in the room that really stood out. Toriko and Akari approached it.

"Can we open it?" Toriko asked.

"Okay..." I replied.

I watched as Toriko and Akari opened the doors from both sides.

"I knew it!" Toriko said.

There was no Buddha statue or mortuary tablet. The door itself was an entrance, leading into a hall with a wooden floor beyond it. I let out an involuntary sigh.

“Guess we have no choice but to go in...”

We took the step up and through the doors, entering the new hall. Kozakura, who was so terrified that she had gone mute, clung tightly to my back.

There was a long line of tatami rooms on either side of the hall. The creepy green lighting was gone, leaving nothing but pitch-dark rooms.

Floorboards creaked as we walked slowly down the hall.

“Sorawo, on the right,” Toriko suddenly warned.

I reflexively looked that way, and there was a woman in a red dress standing alone in the middle of a tatami room. She didn’t move. The eyes covered by her black hair didn’t have the light of life in them.

“Is it a doll...?” Akari wondered aloud.

“It’s a bit too detailed for that...” Toriko said without lowering her gun. It looked that way to me too. It was motionless, like a doll, but didn’t have the rigidity. I didn’t think it was a corpse either. It felt like a human body that had just never been alive.

We moved onward, worrying it might spring to life at any moment, only to then come across a woman with her face gouged off.

“Isn’t that the woman who ran out onto the road before?” Akari said, sounding suspicious.

That woman had been shot with the AK and then run over hard, but the one illuminated by Toriko’s light showed no trace of those injuries. Like the woman in the red dress, she seemed strangely lifelike for a doll.

“Did they leave these here to scare the people who come in?” Akari asked, which made me cock my head to the side.

“You’d think they’d move more if that was it.”

“Yeah, they’re just standing there. That does make it creepy, not knowing

what they're going to do, though."

That creepiness Akari was talking about only grew stronger with the next one. There was a middle-aged salaryman hanging from the ceiling of a tatami room. It wasn't clear if this one was dead or alive either, but it looked like a flesh and blood human was suspended in midair. That made me shudder more than some corpses would.

The next room had a man with a saw. His face was horribly crushed, with several nails sticking out of it. The guy who came up in Benimori's story...

"Can you tell us anything, Sorawo?"

"I'm not completely sure, but I think these guys probably all show up in T-san the Templeborn stories."

"The women from before too?"

"Yeah. But I wonder why they're not reacting."

A large number of black shadows stood in the next tatami room. They were humanoid, but I could only call them shadows. When we shone the light on them to look closer, their faces were indistinct.

Next was the disembodied head of a woman with long hair, lying on the floor.

"It's more like...we're behind the scenes at a haunted house," Akari commented.

"Behind the scenes?"

"So to speak. Like when their turn comes, the power will come on, and these guys will jump out in front of the guests, but they're left in the back like this until then."

"This is reminding me of what Abarato told us," Toriko said, looking back down the hall we had come from. He said he'd seen something that looked like a person, but it stood there like a tree, never reacting... And another that was like someone had tried to make a human out of clay, only to abandon it part way. These could be the same sort of thing. If our speculation that entities on the Otherside are making pseudo-humans as 'interfaces' to make contact with us is correct, that might be what these are too..."

“Home...” Kozakura, who had been silent all this time, mumbled to herself.

“Come again?” I turned my head to look behind me, and Kozakura, who was clinging to me, had her face buried in my back as she talked to herself.

“Home, home, a new home.”

“Kozakura-san...?”

I was thinking she had hit her limit and wanted to go home, but that was short-lived as Kozakura began shouting out loud.

“Continue, continue, continue! Continue! Continue! Continue!”

“A-Are you okay?!”

“What’s wrong, Kozakura?”

Her abnormal behavior worried us. Kozakura shook her head back and forth vigorously, continuing to shout.

“This? This? This?”

“Kozakura-san, calm down a little and—”

“Senpai! Behind us...!” I looked up in response to Akari’s voice, and every hair on my back stood on end.

There were a whole bunch of faces peering out at us from the rooms we’d just walked past.

White faces, shadowed faces, male and female faces. I felt like I recognized some of them. Before I could see whose faces they were, or what expressions they were making, I reflexively averted my eyes.

A woman’s disembodied head lay where my eyes fell. The white face staring up at me from the middle of the copious amount of hair spread out across the tatami was wearing black-rimmed glasses.

With her face lowered, Kozakura shouted, “Do you want to end up like this too? Do you want to end up like this too? Should I do it to you? Should I do it to you?”

Who is that?

The moment I thought that, as if they had sensed it, the person who had taken the form of Kozakura and was clinging to my back stopped moving. The glossy red lips of the disembodied head on the tatami suddenly seemed to smile. Whoever it was that wasn't Kozakura began to lift their face, looking up at me, and— "Hah!!!"

I heard an intense shout from behind me as a pure white light blew everything away.

When I opened my eyes again, the scenery in front of me had changed completely. The dark hall, the endless line of tatami rooms, the horde of pseudo-humans—all gone. Kozakura was gone too. It was just me, Toriko, and Akari.

We were in a large white room; large enough that I didn't know if "room" was the right word for it. All I could see around us was the floor, and one wall. Every other direction was white mist. It wasn't even clear there was a ceiling.

The wall had a massive blue sun drawn on it. A familiar man stood in front of that circle, and it reminded me of the blue sun I had seen in the sunset town. He was a big guy, standing nearly two meters tall. His head was shaved, and his sharp eyes were fixed on me. He wore a black monk's robe and a golden mantle. I had no doubt this was T-san the Templeborn.

"TORIKO NISHINA," T-san said, looking at Toriko. Then he looked towards me.

"SORAWO KAMIKOSHI."

He didn't call Akari's name.

"Isn't he the guy from before?" Akari asked suspiciously. Toriko pointed her AK at T-san. The light was still on, and it should have been really bright, but T-san didn't even squint.

"You're T-san? What're you up to?" Toriko questioned him in a stern tone and T-san opened his mouth.

"I rode the tide of the dead calling the dead. The coast is trying to pull us in."

"Leave us alone. Toriko and I aren't going there."

"There's nothing that's not communication."

“That communication will drive us insane.”

“I spread a barrier to reach another morning.”

“Well, don’t. We have our own morning to reach.”

“It’s that woman. I thought again.”

“That woman?”

“Nishina-senpai... What have you two been talking about this whole time?!” Akari shouted, not able to restrain herself any longer. I thought it was perfectly clear, so I was surprised that Akari didn’t understand.

It was also obvious that talking to T-san any longer was dangerous. He was an interface for “them.” The ones on the other side of the Otherside. The longer we were in contact with him, the more it would drive us mad. Fear and madness. That was the sole channel they shared with us.

When I realized that, I also realized why T-san had attacked us.

“Toriko, Akari. There’s no need to talk. This guy’s an enemy. That ‘Hah!’ he just did wasn’t to save us.”

“What was it, then? What does this guy want to do?” Toriko asked.

“I think he’s experimenting. How will we react when cut off from the Otherside? What will happen to us if the connection is severed? What will we do when he makes contact again? The ‘phenomenon’ that takes the form of T-san is a test to shake us up, confuse us, and evoke a variety of reactions to the Otherside.”

“So, that means this guy really did get violent with you, then, Senpai...?” Akari said, addressing only the part she could understand.

Thinking, *Eh, that’s good enough*, I nodded.

“Essentially, yes.”

“Got it,” Akari said, her voice low as she moved forward. T-san turned to look at her.

“AKARI SETO—”

When I heard T-san say her name, I couldn’t help but speak up. “Don’t mind

her.”

“Don’t worry, Senpai. Watch me.”

With that said, Akari turned her palm towards T-san, and...

“Hah!!!”

At that moment, my right eye was focused on Akari.

I saw the Hah! wave start about thirty centimeters in front of T-san, spread out and pierce through Akari. For an instant, there was a powerful silver spark, starting in the middle of Akari’s brain, and traveling down her spine. My right eye caught it as it rapidly faded away. The weakening light started to shine again. My eye and T-san’s Hah! were fighting inside Akari’s body.

The T-san I saw through Akari’s body wasn’t a man dressed like a monk, but a flaming blue humanoid figure like a cutout of the Otherside sky. The two blue lines stretching across the floor from his feet were connected directly to the blue circle on the wall.

“You okay, Akari? Do you remember me?” I asked, trying to look at both Akari and T-san at the same time, and she responded in a somewhat dazed voice.

“Senpai... My body feels kinda warm.”

“Warm...?”

“Aww. I was trying to save this one, but it looks like I’ve got no choice, huh?”

As Akari stood in a fighting stance in front of T-san, I saw her fist loosen a bit. It was like when an archer relaxed just before loosing a drawn arrow.

“Mind if I go all out...?”

I thought about “them,” the ones on the other side of the Otherside. The mysterious guys who peered into my head, trying to contact me through the context of ghost stories. Beings so far beyond comprehension that even focusing my thoughts on them could bring insanity.

I didn’t know what they were up to, but I could say one thing for sure: they’d laid their hands on Akari where I could see them. My one and only adorable kouhai who respected and cared about me.

They were gonna pay.

“Sure,” I nodded. “Get him, Akari.”

The moment I said that, Akari charged in like a beast off her leash. No shout, no response to me, no nothing. She threw her full body into a strike that hit T-san right in the middle of his stomach, and the right foot that she had stepped forward with came down on his knee, snapping it in half. Then, as T-san doubled over, her left foot went up high and came down on top of his head.

Toriko and I could only watch in shock as she landed that brilliant combo. Akari casually landed another kick on T-san’s face as he lay prone on the ground, then, once she was sure her opponent wasn’t getting back up, she spun around to look at me.

“I did it!” Akari said with a perfect smile, her violent impulses having been unleashed by my right eye.

Behind her, the massive blue sun seemed to melt and start dripping. Many blue lines ran down from the blue circle and stretched straight across the floor. They came in sets of two, rising from the floor to assume human form.

A man with short hair. A man with a shaved head. A man with long hair and sunglasses. A man with a wart on his forehead. A man who looked like a Buddhist nun. A man with the corners of his forehead shaved. A man with stubble and a Hawaiian shirt. A man with white hair and a kimono. A man in a black suit. A man who looked like a construction worker. A man in a convenience store uniform...

They all looked different, yet they all looked familiar. I could tell at a glance that they were all T-san the Templeborn.

“I knew it...” T-san said.

“As we spoke, I gradually started to feel something was off. They say it barks at the front door when no one is there. So, to you, communication was not something you ‘make.’ Then what is it...?” another T-san said.

“Why did you punch me?” yet another T-san said.

“This is frustrating. Won’t you come in?”

The T-sans stepped towards us in unison. A shudder ran down my spine.
“Shoot them, Toriko!!!” I shouted.

The AK roared, spewing bullets that mowed down one T-san after another. They were torn apart like paper dolls.

“Me too, Senpai!” Akari said, turning to look back at me and I gave her a nod.

“Blow them away! All of them!!!”

“Leave it to me!”

Akari leapt into the middle of the approaching T-sans, throwing her fists with incredible vigor.

The T-san horde held out their hands towards us. Hah! after Hah! slammed into my vision. I focused my mind so I wouldn't be overcome, watching over Toriko and Akari.

My eye hurt. In the center of my teary vision, the blue sun blurred, and melted away...

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The next thing I knew, it was morning.

The thing that had been the blue circle on the wall had melted, shrunk, and at some point become the morning sun shining above the treetops.

Exhausted both physically and mentally, the three of us sat leaning against one another for support. I remembered driving off a group of T-sans, but when we had returned to the surface world was kind of vague.

Even after coming back, we were still in an amusement park. The tracks of a roller coaster ran overhead, and the horses of the merry-go-round glistened in the morning dew. I could see construction materials laying around and buildings in the process of being demolished, so this had to be an amusement park that had shut down. The sign for the haunted house had been taken down, and it just looked like an ordinary wooden house.

Turning to look behind me, I saw the Benz parked next to the house of

mirrors. Kozakura was collapsed over the steering wheel, unconscious. When I tapped on the window with my knuckles, she was jolted awake. Opening the window, she squinted at us with eyes that hadn't adjusted to the light just yet.

"What...happened?"

"You first, Kozakura... When did you get back to the car?"

"Back? Uh... I don't know. I was sure I was walking down a hallway with you at least part of the way... Was that a dream?"

No one had any answers.

It was five o'clock in the morning. Checking our current location on her phone, Kozakura seemed surprised. "Wait, this is Toshimaen."

It was along the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line, not far from Kozakura's house.

"For now...do you want to come back to my place?"

Kozakura's desire to just go home was written all over her face as she said that. We were exhausted too, and no one objected, so that's what we did.

Three of us lifted up the chains closing off the construction site as we took the car out of the park.

This time, I got into the back seat right away, and Akari ended up in the front. Toriko and I slumped close together, our heads bobbing up and down with increasing drowsiness.

As I was nodding off, Toriko whispered in my ear. "Was it okay? Getting her involved."

"Akari? Well... We didn't have much choice," I replied, also whispering.

"Weren't you saying you wouldn't get anyone but the two of us involved?"

"I didn't want to."

The reason I hadn't stuck to that this time was partially because Akari was already pretty deeply involved with Otherside stuff, and because of a change of mentality on my part too. To put it in broad terms, I felt responsible. For the effect my right eye might have had on her...

I tried explaining that in a whisper, but Toriko seemed unconvinced. I had a

vague realization. “Hold on. Are you jealous, maybe?” I asked.

Toriko didn’t answer, instead giving me the side-eye.

“Well...?”

“So what if I am?” Toriko muttered. I’d seen a lot of expressions on her before, but this was a new one.

Wow, so Toriko could get jealous over me sometimes, huh? I was speechless for a while, just looking back at her.

“It was an emergency... Normally, it’ll just be the two of us. You know that, right?” Once I managed to get out that answer, Toriko looked away without saying a word, leaning her head against my shoulder.

The car arrived at Kozakura’s mansion in Shakujii-kouen. I got out, stretched, and took a deep breath.

As I moved to follow Kozakura, who had kindly said, “You can join me for tea at least,” there was a thunk behind me.

Hmm? The only thing behind us is the Benz... I thought, but then I heard it again.

This time, Kozakura noticed it too.

“What was that? Did something fall over?”

We went back to the car and peered inside.

“There’s nothing inside... Is it the trunk?”

Kozakura walked around back and opened the trunk before letting out an exclamation of surprise and backing away.

“Why?!”

We walked up beside her and took a peek ourselves.

“You’re kidding me!” I cried out.

“When’d she get in there...?” Toriko wondered.

That girl was inside the trunk. This made it look like we had abducted her, but she was curled up like a kitten, mumbling in her sleep.

Had she been with us ever since we left DS Research...? Hiding in the trunk?

“Did you kidnap her?” Akari, who didn’t know the situation, asked the obvious question. Kozakura vigorously shook her head.

When Toriko shook her shoulder, the girl’s eyes snapped open and she sat up in the trunk. She looked around, completely calm.

She’s awfully relaxed considering that she’s suddenly finding herself in a place she doesn’t know, I thought before realizing that, come to think of it, this had been the first place she came to in the surface world.

“Well, nothing we can do now that she’s already here... Toriko, take her inside too.”

“Okay. Let’s go, now.” When Toriko offered her hand to her, the girl obediently got out of the trunk on her own and took it.

“So, for a name... How’s Kasumi sound?” I said as I watched them.

“Huh?”

“For the kid. I thought of it.”

“Kasumi? Like ‘mist’?”

“Because she’s always appearing and disappearing. It’s not that weird a name, right?”

“I dunno... What do you think?”

Toriko peered at the little girl’s face. She wasn’t showing any particular reaction.

“She doesn’t seem to object.”

“Well, that’s what we’re going with, then.”

I’d put some proper thought into choosing it, but was it really okay to just decide on a name for someone so easily? The nameless girl, now known as “Kasumi,” walked into Kozakura’s mansion with us.

“Hold on a moment. I’ll go get something to wipe your feet with.” Kozakura went to fetch a towel, leaving Kasumi—who wasn’t wearing any shoes—with us. Kasumi had been here once before, but she looked around the largely

unfurnished front hall with interest.

Kozakura soon returned.

“Okay, lift your foot.”

While Kozakura was wiping her feet, Kasumi spoke up quietly. “You sure live in a big house, Kozakura. A lovely mansion.”

“Huh...?”

Kozakura looked up, dumbfounded, as Kasumi continued.

“But isn’t it a little *too* big to live in alone...?”

Kozakura’s eyes widened in surprise. This had come so suddenly that these didn’t seem like Kasumi’s own words, but like she was using some quotation from the past. Still, I didn’t recognize it. I didn’t recall saying that myself, and it didn’t sound like something Toriko would have said either.

“Was that...?” I asked, but Kozakura didn’t seem to hear me.

She had stopped wiping, so Kasumi assumed she was finished and went inside, her feet pattering as she ran down the hall. Kozakura watched in blank amazement as she went.

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. It will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

■File 20: T is for Templeborn

As touched on in the story, T-san the Templeborn is a character who shows up in the middle of ghost stories to shout “Hah!” and blow away the monsters. The oldest records one can find are from the 2channel message board’s News Flash (VIP) board’s “Kowai to Misekakete Waraeru Hanashi” [Stories That Seem Scary but Are Funny] thread, posts 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, and 30 (9/9/2017).

- 24 is “Akai Wanpiisu no Onna” [The Woman in the Red Dress]. T-san uses a pale blue bead of light to blow away a woman who causes car accidents.
- 25 is “Namakubi” [Disembodied Head]. T-san catches and sets a disembodied female head that has been possessing the narrator’s girlfriend on fire.
- 26 is “Kaisuiyou” [Swimming in the Sea]. The narrator is being pulled in by a swarm of black shadows when his friend T-san surfs in to save him.
- 27 is “Akumu” [Nightmare]. The amulet T-san gives to the narrator blows the man with a saw who appears in his nightmare in half.
- 29 is “Yotsuri” [Night Fishing]. Countless humanoid figures try to make the narrator commit suicide until T-san spins his rod around and shreds them with his fishing line.
- 30 is “Rouken” [Old Dog]. T-san pats the old dog that has been defending the narrator’s house from the spirits of the dead and the spirits start to take a different route.

This thread saw a number of “stories that seem scary but are actually funny,”

including the T-san stories, written in a short period of time by a poster with the same user ID. This poster's ID also matched that of the thread starter. Therefore, we can conclude that the thread starter posted a number of stories he had collected from elsewhere or had already written in quick succession. In other words, it is highly likely that T-san did not originate in this thread.

There is a post in the Niconico Encyclopedia's "Teraumare no T-san" [T-san the Templeborn] entry, comment 103 (27/10/2012). Here is a portion of it:

"The first one came from the comment section of a certain blog that had a fake ghost story with a joke in it. I think it was Night Fishing."

"I remember seeing people who realized it was a joke, and those who simply enjoyed the idea of a ghost story destroyer."

"I got carried away and posted The Woman in the Red, Night Swimming, and Nightmare one after another. Everyone loved them."

"After that, someone said they wanted to make a thread on 2ch, and I enthusiastically approved."

"That brings us to now. The only thing I can say when I see the influence those posts had and the fact T-san is still around today is, 'Hahhhh?!'"

As noted above, this statement is consistent with the way the "Stories That Seem Scary but are Funny" thread was posted, so it seems highly believable, and yet there are no responses to this comment. No one has paid it any heed up to this day in 2021.

I tried to find where the comment section of the blog in question might be, but to no avail. There are few things harder to preserve than the comments of a personal blog, but it is still regrettable. The Niconico Encyclopedia page which I referenced will no doubt disappear someday too. Those who wish to do so should preserve it with copy/paste, screenshots, services like web gyotaku, or other means.

As I stated in volume three, as a general rule, I don't use stories that are clearly stated to be fictional in this work, but this time marks the first exception.

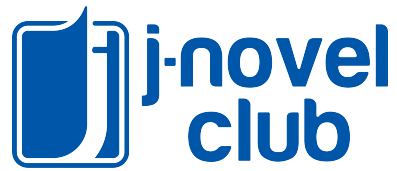
I struggled with the decision, but the concept for volume 6 was to make a “theatrical version” with a single volume-length file. By having the famous T-san make an appearance, I felt that would give it a slightly different, more festive feel than usual, so I decided to disregard my general rule.

The lines T-san speaks in the main story and certain situations are taken from the above mentioned posts (and likely, by extension, the originals).

The blue sun drawn on the wall in the apartment basement is based on Story #69 “Chikashitsu” [The Basement], included in *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Daiichiya* [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The First Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Media Factory, 1998). When a house is demolished to build a new one, another room five or six meters below the basement is discovered, and the west wall of that room, which is less than two tatami-mats in size, has a crimson sun with a diameter of twenty centimeters drawn on it. This report from *Shinmimibukuro*, a book which is one of the inspirations for this series and which I have drawn from repeatedly, was one that featured no supernatural elements and yet still left an intense impression on me after I first read it.

I know I always say this, but I would like to give my thanks to the people who reported the many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence. And, for this time only, I would like to thank the writers of T-san the Templeborn stories too.

Thank you for your continued enjoyment and for being frightened. I hope this book can repay my gratitude in some small way.



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Otherside Picnic: Volume 6

by Iori Miyazawa

Illustrations by shirakaba Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Krys Loh

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